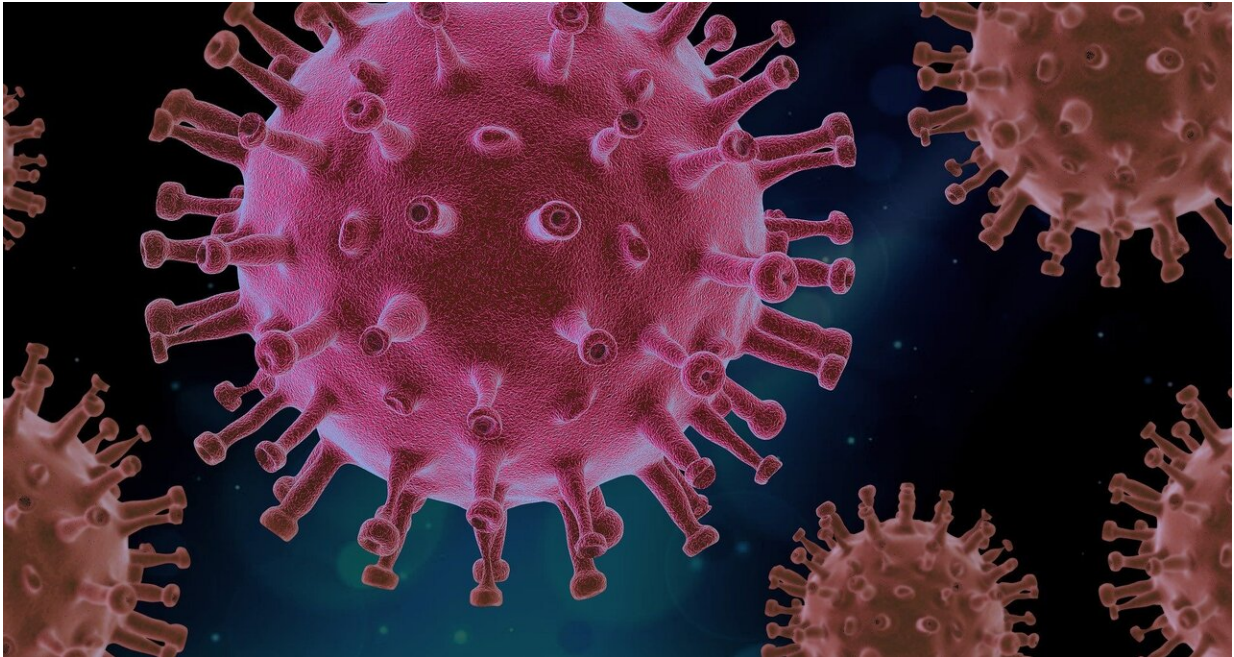


Cancer care needs mass COVID-19 testing

April 17 2020



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Thousands of cancer patients in the UK have had their treatment stopped or delayed because of COVID-19, and with pressures mounting on the health service, Cancer Research UK calls for widespread testing to prevent unnecessary cancer deaths.

The global pandemic has caused enormous disruption to cancer services across the country including delays to cancer treatment, screening and diagnosis, and profound decreases in patients being urgently referred to

[hospital](#) with suspected cancer symptoms.

In some cases, already overstretched NHS staff are being directed away from [cancer care](#), towards caring for COVID-19 patients. And in other cases, where a [cancer patient](#) might have a weakened immune system as a result of [cancer treatment](#), it may not be safe for them to go to hospital.

The NHS is working tirelessly and has been forced to make difficult decisions during an unprecedented time. They have committed to prioritising cancer care, but Cancer Research UK is concerned that the NHS will not be able to cope with the large backlog of cancer care needed as services reopen, unless steps are taken to plan for the future, including COVID-19 testing.

The NHS in England is developing 'COVID-free' centres and hospitals which will be the key to ensuring that the most urgent cancer patients can receive their treatment quickly, but this will only be possible with widescale and frequent testing of NHS staff and patients.

Although some patients are being tested for COVID-19, testing in some areas is reserved for those who are seriously ill. The concern is that a number of people with the virus may be infectious to others before they show symptoms, so for a hospital to be truly safe to treat cancer patients, we need rapid testing available for all staff and patients, whether showing symptoms of COVID-19 or not, occurring on a routine and repetitive basis.

NHS staff testing for COVID-19 has been boosted by repurposing the Francis Crick Institute's laboratory facilities as a testing facility, to help combat the spread of infection and allow healthcare workers to perform lifesaving duties while remaining safe. The institute, as well as other locations around the country, could accept even more samples for testing, to contribute towards the national COVID screening effort.

Sarah Woolnough, Cancer Research UK's executive director of policy and information, said: "The pandemic has left cancer diagnosis and treatment in a precarious position, and one of the ways that the NHS is adapting to ensure patients are receiving vital testing and care is through 'COVID-19 free' centres or hospitals. But this won't be possible without the appropriate testing of all staff and patients.

"Already, Cancer Research UK has helped to increase testing capacity through the Francis Crick Institute. We want to continue to contribute towards the national effort to beat COVID-19, so that cancer patients can receive the care that they need during this difficult time."

Professor Charles Swanton, Cancer Research UK's chief clinician, said: "This pandemic is having a major impact on patients suffering from cancer and the direction it's heading is really concerning. Delays to diagnosis and treatment could mean that some cancers will become inoperable. But it's not too late to turn this around. Cancer patients shouldn't need to wait for the pandemic to pass before getting the treatment they need.

"We can create a [safe environment](#) for both staff and [cancer](#) patients now that testing efforts are escalating quickly. Staff in hospitals around the country are working extremely hard and with more testing of [staff](#) and patients—with and without symptoms—we will have hospitals and centres relatively free from COVID-19 where patients can be treated safely, and post-operative complications can be minimised."

Provided by Cancer Research UK

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