

UK admits it could miss 100,000 daily virus tests target

April 30 2020, by Jill Lawless and Pan Pylas



A medical worker takes a swab at a drive-in coronavirus testing facility at the Chessington World of Adventures Resort in Chessington, England, Wednesday April 29, 2020. Coronavirus testing is now available for more people in England from Wednesday as the government relaxed rules on eligibility. (Aaron Chown/PA via AP)

The British government has acknowledged that it may miss its self-imposed goal of conducting 100,000 tests for coronavirus a day by the end of Thursday. But officials insisted that the U.K. is rapidly expanding the country's testing capacity as it prepares to gradually ease a nationwide lockdown.

The government has been criticized for failing to catch most cases of COVID-19 and now says wide-scale testing will be key to controlling the virus and lifting restrictions on business and daily life that were imposed more than a month ago.

Earlier this month, the government vowed to perform 100,000 tests a day by April 30. The number has been climbing steadily, but the highest daily total reached so far is 52,000 on Wednesday.

Justice Secretary Robert Buckland said that "we're well on our way to ramping this up ... even if the target isn't met today." He told the BBC that "100,000 is an important milestone, but frankly we need more."

Britain's Conservative government is facing growing criticism as it becomes clear the country will have one of the world's highest coronavirus death tolls.

On Wednesday, the U.K.'s official death toll from the virus leaped to more than 26,000 after several thousand deaths in nursing homes were added to the hospital total. Only the United States and Italy have higher tolls, though not all countries use the same measures.



A member of the military, wearing a mask to protect against coronavirus, collects a test at a Covid-19 testing centre as the UK continues in lockdown to help curb the spread of coronavirus, in Hereford, England, Wednesday April 29, 2020. (Jacob King/PA via AP)

Chris Hopson, who heads NHS Providers, an umbrella group for U.K. hospitals, said the 100,000-a-day target was a "red herring," and urged the government to set out a detailed strategy for who would get tested and when.

"What we need to know is what are we going to do in terms of the testing regime over the next six, eight, 10, 12 weeks as we come out of lockdown," Hopson said.

He said 800,000 health care workers will need to be tested regularly to ensure they remain free of the virus.

Meanwhile, as other European countries begin to reopen businesses and schools, Prime Minister Boris Johnson is under pressure to reveal when and how the government will ease a nationwide lockdown that was imposed on March 23. The restrictions are due to last at least until May 7.

Johnson is due to speak at a news conference later and may give hints about the path ahead.



Britain's Health Secretary Matt Hancock arrives at 10 Downing Street, in London, Thursday, April 30, 2020.(AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali)



In this handout photo issued by 10 Downing Street of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson arriving back at Downing Street from hospital after the birth of his baby son with his partner Carrie Symonds in London, Wednesday April 29, 2020. Boris Johnson and his partner Carrie Symonds have announced she gave birth to a "healthy baby boy at a London hospital earlier this morning", and both mother and baby are doing well. (Andrew Parsons/10 Downing Street via AP)



Larry the Downing Street cat, sits on the doorstep of 10 Downing Street in London, with children's drawings of rainbows displayed in the windows Thursday, April 30, 2020. The coronavirus pandemic has prompted a public adoption of the rainbow symbol to show appreciation for key health service workers. (AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali)



A general view of a deserted Camden High Street, as the UK continues its lockdown to help curb the spread of coronavirus, in London, Wednesday April 29, 2020. (Dominic Lipinski/PA via AP)



A street cleaner stands outside shuttered shops on Camden High Street, as the UK continues its lockdown to help curb the spread of coronavirus, in London, Wednesday April 29, 2020. (Dominic Lipinski/PA via AP)

Johnson, 55, only returned to work on Monday after recovering from a bout of COVID-19 that put him in intensive care. On Wednesday his fiancée, Carrie Symonds, gave birth to the couple's son.

The prime minister has warned that lifting restrictions too soon risks a second, even deadlier, wave of the outbreak.

"The worst thing we could do is relax the social distancing measures too soon and throw away all of the progress which has been made thanks to the hard work and sacrifice of the British public," said Johnson's spokesman, James Slack.

Scottish leader Nicola Sturgeon said progress against the virus was "still very fragile" and warned people not to ease up on social distancing.

She said at her daily press briefing that road traffic in Scotland, while less than a third of the level before the lockdown, has increased by around 5% this week and in some towns and cities by 10%.

Sturgeon warned that if "everybody starts easing off, the virus will quickly take off again and it will have devastating consequences for all of us."

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Citation: UK admits it could miss 100,000 daily virus tests target (2020, April 30) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-04-uk-daily-virus.html>

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