

Britain aims for virus testing success after a wobbly start

September 3 2020, by Jill Lawless



People walk across the plaza, around the old normal morning time 'rush hour', at Canary Wharf in central London, Thursday Sept. 3, 2020. Workers are being encouraged to return to their offices, with a Government information campaign reminding people about the efforts taken to make workplaces safe and "Covid-secure". (Victoria Jones/PA via AP)

The British government announced Thursday that it is investing in a coronavirus test that gives results in as little as 20 minutes, touting it as the latest milestone in efforts to take the U.K. to the front of the global pack in testing for COVID-19.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said the government is expanding trials of two new rapid tests—a simple no-swab saliva test and another that gives results in minutes. Britain also is examining the feasibility of repeat testing of people without symptoms, something Prime Minister Boris Johnson has said could lessen the need for social distancing measures.

The government says it will spend up to 500 million pounds (\$660 million) on efforts to achieve mass population testing, a project it has named "Operation Moonshot."

"Short of a vaccine, this is the best chance we have of reducing social distancing whilst controlling the virus, especially with winter coming, with all the challenges that brings," Hancock told the BBC.

Britain lacked mass testing capacity when its virus outbreak began and in March abandoned efforts to track and test the contacts of all people with confirmed cases, a decision authorities now say they regret.

The U.K. has hugely expanded its testing capacity since then. Anyone with coronavirus symptoms is eligible for a test, either at home or at a testing center, and officials say most get the results within 24 hours.



A man walks past the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport in London's Whitehall, around the old normal morning time 'rush hour', in central London, Thursday Sept. 3, 2020. Workers are being encouraged to return to their offices, with a Government information campaign reminding people about the efforts taken to make workplaces safe and "Covid-secure". (Victoria Jones/PA via AP)

But the BBC reported Thursday that people are sometimes being directed to drive-through centers hundreds of miles away when they enter their postcodes into the government's website.

Critics also say the British government is still not doing enough to find and isolate people with the coronavirus.

The government says it has the capacity to perform almost 350,000 tests each day, though only about 180,000 a day are getting processed. It's goal is to reach the capacity for 500,000 tests a day by the end of October.

A nationwide test-and-trace program designed to isolate those who had contact with infected individuals has reached 325,000 people but is still failing to find almost a third of the contacts in confirmed cases. A phone app once touted by the government as a key contact-tracing tool is still in the testing stage.



People use the escalators, around the old normal morning time 'rush hour', at Canary Wharf Underground station in central London, Thursday Sept. 3, 2020. Workers are being encouraged to return to their offices, with a Government information campaign reminding people about the efforts taken to make

workplaces safe and "Covid-secure". (Victoria Jones/PA via AP)



A man uses the entrance to the government Treasury, around the old normal morning time 'rush hour', in central London, Thursday Sept. 3, 2020. Workers are being encouraged to return to their offices, with a Government information campaign reminding people about the efforts taken to make workplaces safe and "Covid-secure". (Victoria Jones/PA via AP)

Hancock insisted the system was working well despite some "operational challenges from time to time."

But Alan McNally, director of the Institute of Microbiology and

Infection at the University of Birmingham, said he thinks the government acted too slowly. Britain's official coronavirus death toll is more than 41,500, the highest in Europe.

"I think the time was right to think about scaling up testing to the wider community and asymptomatic testing over the summer when we were relatively COVID-secure, knowing that autumn and winter would come" and bring a possible second wave, McNally told the BBC.

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