

Shortage of COVID-19 testing hurts efforts to fight 2nd wave

September 15 2020, by Danica Kirka



People drink and dine out in Chinatown, London, Monday Sept. 14, 2020. New rules preventing gatherings of more than six people go into effect in England, Scotland and Wales on Monday, in an effort to simplify directives meant to prevent the spread of COVID-19. (Yui Mok/PA via AP)

A shortage of COVID-19 testing in the U.K. is jeopardizing efforts to restore medical services and prepare for a potential surge in coronavirus cases this winter, the group that represents hospitals in England said Tuesday.

Inadequate testing is leading to increased absences in the National Health Service as staff members are forced to self-isolate while they and their family members wait for [test](#) results after possible exposure to the virus, according to NHS Providers. Last weekend hospital leaders in three different cities raised concerns about testing, said Chris Hopson, the group's CEO.

"The problem is that NHS trusts are working in the dark – they don't know why these shortages are occurring, how long they are likely to last, how geographically widespread they are likely to be and what priority will be given to healthcare workers and their families in accessing scarce tests," Hopson said in a statement.

The shortage comes amid a surge in COVID-19 cases across the U.K. that has pushed daily positive tests to levels last seen in late May and forced the government to impose new controls on public gatherings. Widespread testing is seen as crucial to controlling the spread of the disease because it allows those who are infected to self-isolate, while helping public health officials to identify hot spots and target their response.

The problem is that the "second wave" of the virus is hitting earlier than anticipated, said John Bell, a professor of medicine at the University of Oxford, who has advised ministers on medical research. Authorities underestimated the speed at which more [testing capacity](#) would be needed, Bell said, warning that the problem could get worse.

"I think what's going wrong is the second wave," Bell told the BBC. "A

month ago, they had spare capacity in testing —significant spare capacity—but I think what has been underestimated was the speed at which the second wave would arrive. But also the pressure put on the system from children returning to school, and the testing demands associated with that, and people increasingly out and about."

The government says it has the capacity to process about 243,000 [coronavirus](#) tests a day, up from 220,000 at the end of August. Over the past week, many people have complained that they were being sent to testing centers far from their homes, sometimes hundreds of miles away.

Home Secretary Priti Patel told the BBC it was "unacceptable" that some people were struggling to get tests, and that most people can get tested within 10 miles (16 kilometers) of their homes.

"It seems to me there'll be extreme cases where people can't get to test locations within that radius, but that doesn't mean that Public Health England are not working night and day to boost capacity," she said.

More testing slots and home testing kits have been made available as demand rises, she said.

Moz Bulbeck Reynolds, who lives west of London, said she had been unable to schedule a test through the government testing website since Monday morning. Her 9-year-old daughter, Matilda, needs the test because she stayed home from school with cold symptoms on Thursday and Friday, and the school told her she couldn't return to class without a negative test.

"I feel sorry for my daughter... rejected at the school gate," Bulbeck Reynolds, 45, told Britain's Press Association. "It made me feel like a failure as a parent."

The government last week announced plans for an ambitious program, dubbed Operation Moonshot, that aims to administer millions of tests a day. But the estimated cost for the program nearly matches the NHS budget, Dr. Chaand Nagpaul said in the text of a speech to be delivered Tuesday to the annual meeting of the doctor's union.

"The government is now shooting for the moon promising to deliver mass continuous testing with a test that doesn't yet exist at a cost nearly as much as the total NHS budget," he said. "Down here on Planet Earth, we need a fit-for-purpose test and trace system in the here and now with capacity, agility and accessibility that doesn't require 100-mile journeys that disadvantage some of the most vulnerable."

Professor Alan McNally, director of the institute of microbiology and infection at the University of Birmingham, told the BBC there were "clearly underlying issues which nobody wants to tell us about," together with increased need for testing.

"I think there is a surge in demand (and) I think our stated capacity is very different from actually how many tests can be run in a given day," he said. "It's very worrying that we seem to be in a situation before really we've come into autumn and winter where we've maxed out the number of tests we can do in the country, and that is very concerning."

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Citation: Shortage of COVID-19 testing hurts efforts to fight 2nd wave (2020, September 15) retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-09-shortage-covid-efforts-2nd.html>

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