

England ends free virus tests under 'living with COVID' plan

March 31 2022, by Jill Lawless



A pupil is given a PCR test during COVID-19 testing at a school in Manchester, England, March 8, 2021. The British government is ending the supply of free rapid coronavirus tests to most of the population starting Friday, April 1, 2022, even as health officials say COVID-19 infections remain at record levels, and the pandemic could still have nasty surprises in store. More than 1.7 billion test kits have been handed out in workplaces, pharmacies and by mail over the past year, the government says, under a policy that encouraged people to test themselves regularly as a way to stamp out new outbreaks. Credit: AP

Photo/Jon Super, file

The British government is ending the supply of free rapid coronavirus tests to most of the population even though COVID-19 infections remain at record levels, and health officials warn the pandemic could still have nasty surprises in store.

More than 1.7 billion [test](#) kits have been handed out in workplaces, pharmacies and by mail over the past year, the government says, under a policy that encouraged people to test themselves regularly as a way to stamp out new outbreaks.

But starting Friday, most people in England will have to buy lateral flow tests from pharmacies or online suppliers.

Lateral flow tests use throat or nose swabs and give results in minutes, but are less accurate than the PCR swab tests used to officially confirm cases of COVID-19.

Tests will remain free for staff in high-risk settings such as hospitals, nursing homes, hospices and prisons, but under the government's "Living with COVID" plan most other people in England will now have to pay. Some free testing will continue for several weeks in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Lawmaker Daisy Cooper, health spokeswoman for the opposition Liberal Democrats, said scrapping free tests would be another expense for people already coping with surging food and energy prices.

"It is a tax on caring for all those who want to do the right thing and get tested before visiting elderly or vulnerable relatives," she said.

Critics also argue that the move comes at a dangerous time, with an estimated 1 in 16 people in England infected with the virus, according to the Office for National Statistics. There were 15,632 people in hospital in England with COVID-19 as of Wednesday, the highest number for more than three months.

The number of COVID-19 patients on ventilators remains low, however, and deaths are far below the peaks of previous waves in 2020 and 2021.

Britain has recorded more than 165,000 coronavirus deaths, the highest toll in Europe after Russia. The government lifted all remaining restrictions for England—including mask mandates, mandatory self-isolation for the infectious and testing for international travelers—earlier this year, even as omicron, the most transmissible variant yet, swept in.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government is relying largely on vaccination and new treatments to keep the virus in check. Almost 92% of people age 12 and up in the U.K. have had two doses of a vaccine, and more than two-thirds have had a third, booster shot. Fourth doses are being given to the vulnerable and those aged 75 and over.

Jenny Harries, chief executive of the U.K. Health Security Agency, said the pandemic would "remain unpredictable to a large extent for the next, say, 18 months to two years."

"We will have to be continuously alert to monitor those rates and to respond appropriately to any new variants," she said. "But as with other respiratory viruses such as flu... at some point we have to come to terms with that."

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