

UK to widen virus measures as new vaccine rollout starts

4 January 2021, by Anna Malpas, Callum Paton



'It's the only way of getting back to a bit of normal life,' said Pinker, 82

An 82-year-old man on Monday became the first person in the world to receive AstraZeneca and Oxford University's new COVID jab outside a clinical trial, raising hopes the fight against a resurgent virus will accelerate.

But optimism that the shot could turn the tide against the outbreak was tempered as Scotland said it would lock down again for the rest of the month.

And all four of the United Kingdom's chief medical officers recommended the whole of the country be placed under "Level Five" restrictions, an effective nationwide lock down.

"Many parts of the health systems in the four nations are already under immense pressure," the medical officers for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland said.

"Cases are rising almost everywhere, in much of the country driven by the new more transmissible variant," they argued.

"We are not confident that the NHS (National Health Service) can handle a further sustained rise in cases and without further action there is a material risk of the NHS in several areas being overwhelmed," they added.

UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson will address the nation later on Wednesday to lay out what his spokesman said were steps to tackle the "rapidly escalating case numbers" blamed on a new variant of the virus.

Betting on mass-vaccination

Britain—one of the worst-affected countries by the global health crisis, with over 75,000 deaths—has been pinning its hopes on a mass vaccination drive to halt the resurgent virus.

But the speed of transmission of the new variant is causing widespread alarm, with more than 50,000 positive cases recorded across Britain every day for the last week.



Johnson has said tougher restrictions are inevitable

Johnson said earlier on Monday there was "no question" the surge would mean tougher restrictions across England, as calls for a new nationwide lockdown grew.

Some 44 million people—more than three-quarters of England's population—are already being advised to stay at home and work remotely.

Non-essential shops have been shut, along with bars, restaurants and other hospitality and entertainment venues.

But those curbs have not noticeably slowed the steep rise in cases, and ministers are facing mounting pressure to delay the return of schools after the Christmas holiday.

The leader of the main opposition Labour party, Keir Starmer, on Sunday said national restrictions needed to be brought in "within the next 24 hours".

"The virus is clearly out of control," he added.

In Scotland, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said the new variant accounted for more than half of all new cases, and she was more concerned about the situation than at any time since March.

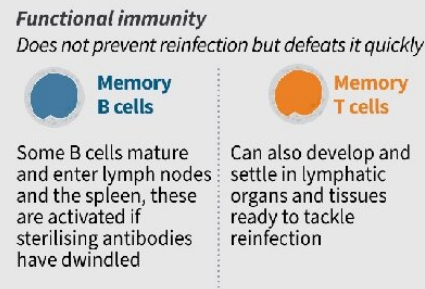
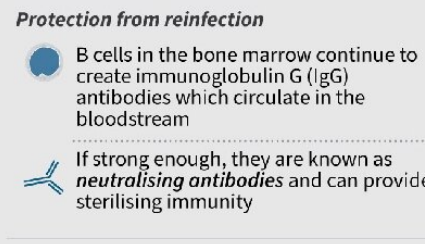
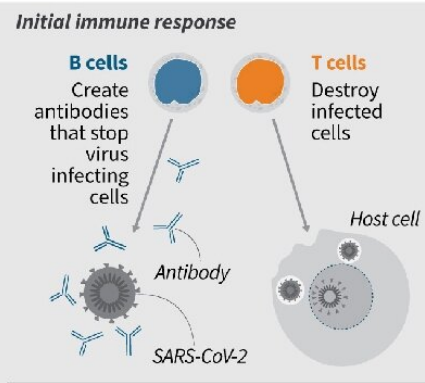
The new measures, which include working from home and limits on two people from two households meeting outside, come into force from midnight (0000 GMT Tuesday), she added.

New vaccine easier to store

The announcement overshadowed the first Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine given to a member of the public—part of what health chiefs have called Britain's biggest ever vaccination drive.

Now that you've been vaccinated...

The aim of inoculation is to activate a natural immune response, which can include short-term and long-term protection



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Covid-19 vaccines

To what extent a new vaccine succeeds in triggering long-term effects cannot be confirmed until enough time has passed since the jab

Newly approved Covid-19 vaccines will continue to be monitored to get a better understanding of their long-term efficacy

Studies have shown that it is possible for the same person to be infected twice with SARS-CoV-2

This could imply that the vaccination may also be short-lived

On the other hand, the second infections may have been due to a weak initial immune response

In which case, a sufficient dose delivered via a jab could ensure lasting protection

Graphic on the immune response that inoculations are designed to activate

Brian Pinker, a retired maintenance manager on dialysis for kidney disease, got the shot at an Oxford hospital, and said it was "the only way of getting back to a bit of normal life".

Andrew Pollard, the director of the Oxford Vaccine Group that developed the vaccine, was among the first to receive it.

Some 530,000 doses are to be administered at new vaccination sites across Britain, adding to those already giving the Pfizer-BioNTech jab since early last month.

Johnson promised the number vaccinated "will be tens of millions by March", despite concerns about the speed of the roll-out.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock described the next few weeks and months as a "difficult time" but said the vaccine offered hope for a return to normality.

The UK has already ordered 100 million doses of the vaccine, which Pollard has said could transform the world's fight against the outbreak.

Britain became the first country in the world to approve the use of a vaccine produced by Pfizer-BioNTech on December 2, and has already given nearly one million people a first dose.

The Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine is far cheaper than its rivals, costing about £2.50 (\$3.40, 2.75 euros) per dose, making it affordable for developing countries.

It can also be kept in the fridge, while Pfizer-BioNTech's requires storage at ultra-low temperatures.

AstraZeneca has said it plans to increase production capacity globally to up to 3 billion doses this year.

The UK plans to administer it in two doses with an interval of four to 12 weeks. Priority is being given to the elderly and clinically vulnerable.

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