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Public Health Wales statement on Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak

This statement will be updated daily at midday

Statement: Updated at 12pm on Tuesday 22 December 2020

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Dr Robin Howe, Incident Director for the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak response at Public Health Wales, said:

"Public Health Wales is working with the Welsh Government, local health boards, local authorities and other partners following the announcement of national restrictions in Wales from midnight 20 December 2020.

"Under the new restrictions, people must stay at home, except for very limited purposes. People must not visit other households or meet other people they do not live with. Non-essential retail, close contact services, gyms and leisure centres, and hospitality will also close.

"Rules which allow two households to come together to form a Christmas bubble will now apply on Christmas Day only.

"As indicated by the Welsh Government, the immediate introduction of new restrictions is related to the identification of a new more transmissible variant of Coronavirus. Public Health Wales has been working with UK partners to investigate and respond to this variant.

"It is normal for viruses to undergo mutations, and we expect this to happen. Although the variant is easier to transmit, there is currently no evidence that it is more severe.

"We are reminding people that all current guidance relating to Coronavirus continues to apply to the new variant, including advice relating to symptoms, social distancing, self-isolation, and vaccination.

"We remind people that the more people that you mix with, the higher the risk of both transmitting and contracting Coronavirus, and you must change your Christmas plans.

"We advise everyone to stay at home as much as possible, and to limit your social contacts.

"The more people who contract the virus, the greater the number who will need hospital treatment in our already stretched NHS Wales services.

"By staying at home, you will help protect our NHS and ultimately save lives.

"Public Health Wales will not be reporting Coronavirus data on its public facing data dashboard or social media channels on Friday 25 December or Friday 1 January.

"Users should be aware that there will be a backlog of data that will flow through to the system on Saturday 26 December and Saturday 2 January.

"This will not affect individuals receiving their results, and anyone who tests positive will be contacted by their local authority's Test, Trace, Protect team in the usual way.

"The Public Health Wales public-facing data dashboard is a rapid reporting tool which is subject to correction and reconciliation. Official statistics are provided by the Office of National Statistics.

"The new variant shows up as positive in Public Health Wales' existing Coronavirus tests, and people must continue to seek a test in the usual way if they develop Coronavirus symptoms.

"If you or a member of your household develop a cough, fever or change in sense of taste or smell, you must self-isolate immediately and book a free Coronavirus test, either by calling 119 or [by clicking here](#).

"If you are due to travel out of the UK, please be aware of the changing situation and keep an eye on the [FCO website](#) for up to date details.

"Public Health Wales urges everyone to follow the rules, to avoid transmission of Coronavirus and to protect everyone in our communities, including the most vulnerable."

Frequently Asked Questions

Why has this new Coronavirus variant become such an issue suddenly?

It is normal for viruses to mutate, and the new variant of Coronavirus that is now circulating in the UK is as a result of such a mutation.

We think the new variant has been circulating since at least 1 November 2020. So far, more than 1,400 cases have been identified in England, mainly in the South East. As of 14 December around 20 cases have been confirmed in Wales but the true figure is likely to be higher (several hundreds).

Experts are concerned about the impact of this particular variant because of how common it is, and how fast it spreads.

This variant is easier to spread. Does that mean it requires more Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for health and care staff?

The key advice remain the same – that's maintaining two-metre social distancing, washing hands, and use of personal protective equipment.

Health and social care workers should ensure that they have the correct PPE for the areas in which they are working, have been trained in the use of the PPE and use it correctly. It is also essential to ensure that these measures are observed in communal areas outside the clinical areas, like break areas, and when travelling to and from work.

If I have the new variant, will the test pick it up?

Yes. The current tests used in Wales are not affected by the changes in this variant and will still detect the virus.

Is this widespread across Wales or just limited to South East Wales?

The variant has been identified in all areas of Wales.

How many cases have been identified in Wales so far?

As of 14 December, 20 confirmed cases have been identified, but estimates suggest estimates suggest that approximately 11% of recent new cases (over 600) of COVID-19 are.

It is likely that the variant represents an even higher percentage of overall cases, and this percentage is increasing over time.

When did we know of the first cases in Wales, and what actions have PHW been taking?

It is difficult to tell when this variant started circulating in Wales, but we believe the earliest cases might be from around early November.

Wales is a member of the national Incident Management Team which is currently meeting daily, with wider meetings twice a week. Public Health Wales contribute daily case numbers based on sequencing data, and also an epidemiology summary for confirmed cases. Wales has contributed to a European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) rapid threat assessment on the variant. A protocol for a case-control method to estimate whether reinfections are more likely in variant cases has been developed in Wales and shared for use with Public Health England and Northern Ireland.

Do clinicians need to make any changes to the management plan for treating their current Coronavirus patients?

Currently there is no information to suggest that individuals affected with this variant strain require different type of care. This is will be kept under constant review.

Does this affect the duration of self-isolation period?

No, it does not. The current recommended period of self-isolation applies.

I live in the South East region of Wales and have recently had a positive test for Coronavirus. How will I know if I was infected with the variant strain?

Genomic analyses will tell us whether the strain that infected a particular individual is the new variant or not. However, not all positive tests are sequenced and there is usually a lag before sequencing results come through. There are, however, other indicators that give us an idea of how much of this variant is present here in Wales.

Currently there is no information to suggest that individuals affected with this variant strain require different type of care. This is will be kept under constant review.

I live with someone who is the previous "shielding" group. Do I need to take additional precautions in the light of this new variant?

You will need to continue to take all precautions outlined in the guidance, and people in the clinically extremely vulnerable group should take extra precautions to minimise contact with others in line with the advice given by the Chief Medical Officer for Wales

Will there be more variants in the future?

This is not the first variant of Coronavirus, and is unlikely to be the last. Different variants will have different effects on the course of this pandemic.

Is it more harmful?

There is currently no evidence showing that the variant is more severe than previous viruses. This is being monitored by ongoing surveillance and research.

Should I be doing something differently or following the same rules as before?

The main rules - handwashing, social distancing, and so on - have not changed. But increased restrictions have been announced because the variant is easier to spread and because case numbers have been going up.

Does this virus spread more easily through medical procedures that cause patients to release particles from their lungs – also called 'aerosol generating procedures'?

There is currently no evidence of any difference between this variant and others. But this is something that will be monitored closely going forward.

I have recently received the COVID vaccine? Will it still be effective against this new variant?

There is no evidence to suggest that this vaccine approved for use in the UK will not work against this variant. This will be monitored closely.

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