

Briefing note on coronavirus (COVID-19) for the independent healthcare sector

The NHS has put in place measures to ensure the safety of patients and NHS staff while also ensuring the public can access services as normal.

The approach being taken by the NHS is to identify potential cases of COVID-19, isolate them and then contain the virus. This model is devised to protect GP practices, the ambulance service and our emergency departments. It is designed to keep staff and patients safe while facilities remain open.

What is the advice to patients and the public?

People should call NHS 111 now if they have been:

- to Wuhan or Hubei Province in China in the last 14 days (even if they do not have symptoms)
- to other parts of China, including Macau and Hong Kong, in the last 14 days and have a cough, high temperature or shortness of breath (even if it's mild)
- to Thailand, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Republic of Korea or Malaysia in the last 14 days and have a cough, high temperature or shortness of breath (even if it's mild)
- in close contact with someone with confirmed coronavirus.

Anyone who meets the above criteria should not go to a GP surgery, community pharmacy or hospital. Instead they should call NHS 111, stay indoors and avoid close contact with other people.

Information for the public is available at [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)

How are people tested for COVID-19?

We test individuals when they meet the [criteria for a possible case](#) of COVID-19. Most cases will require a single nose and throat swab which will be sent for testing to PHE Colindale or other identified regional laboratories. Samples required are:

- either a combined nose and throat swab in one collection tube containing universal transport medium
- or a single swab used for throat then nose
- or individual nose and throat swabs in separate collection tubes.

What happens next:

So far, the focus of our work has been to identify individuals who either have the virus or have been in close contact with someone who is known to have it. That is then followed by supervised isolation and treatment if their symptoms are significant. The isolation to date has been in a High Consequence Infectious Disease (HCID) unit.

The HCID response is because this is a novel virus, meaning there is potentially a high consequence for society if it spreads within the community. Patients will be isolated for as long as their symptoms continue and until their viral load has diminished to a level where it's safe for them to be discharged and carry no risk to anybody else.

COVID-19, for the vast majority of people, is like a bad winter cold or flu. Those with mild symptoms would not normally require hospitalisation, but at this stage while we are in the identify, isolate and contain model, we are taking steps to reduce the chance of spread to the community.

As we learn more about the virus, the steps we will take to identify, isolate, test and contain will change.

FAQ

What should the Independent Healthcare Partners Network be aware of?

Make sure that you ask international patients about their recent travel history. Remember to check if they have been:

- to Wuhan or Hubei Province in China in the last 14 days (even if they do not have symptoms)
- to other parts of China, including Macau and Hong Kong, in the last 14 days and have a cough, high temperature or shortness of breath (even if it's mild)
- to Thailand, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Republic of Korea or Malaysia in the last 14 days and have a cough, high temperature or shortness of breath (even if it's mild)

If any of the above apply then do not transfer them to your facilities, and please instruct them to follow the [specific advice for returning travellers](#).

We've updated recorded messages on the phones, but should we also use our text-messaging systems to send out the reminder to call NHS 111 instead of travelling to a GP surgery or hospital?

Yes, please use text message reminders for people who are coming in for appointments to make sure they don't fulfil the [case definition](#) (template SMS messages can be found in Annex 1).

Is there any guidance for staff coming back from affected areas who are asymptomatic? And should employers be taking any special precautions?

Public Health England has [published guidance](#) specifically relating to healthcare workers returning from areas of concern. The guidance for healthcare workers covers those who have travelled or have come into contact with a known case. However, if health practitioners come into contact (using the definition of close contact [here](#)) with a suspected case they should continue to practise as normal. Should the case then be confirmed, PHE will undertake contact tracing which may include the practitioner.

Is there a role for private sector hospitals in taking viral swabs on isolating potential cases or prior to sending home to self-isolate?

There are only two routes by which diagnostic swabs will be requested, if swabs are needed: they should only be delivered after the individual has called NHS 111 or if the person is contacted by the contact tracing service and PHE.

Taking the diagnostic swabs requires personal protection equipment (PPE) because the person is by definition a suspect case. That will be arranged by NHS 111, either in the individual's home, or to a site located in a hospital where this has been pre-arranged.

If you have a patient who is already hospitalised that needs the testing, we would still recommend that you have the patient call NHS 111 for a clinical assessment.

Are these swabs being sent to patients for self-testing or is this via an attending team?

Patients cannot self-test. This has to be done by someone who has undergone training in the collection of nasal and throat swabs to prevent false negative swabs.

Our hospitals do not have A&E or isolation facilities. Do we follow primary or secondary care guidance?

You should follow the guidance for primary care which can be found [here](#).

If you do not have isolation facilities, your hospital is effectively a public place. The same advice that would be given to any suspected case should be followed: go home immediately, avoid contact with others, cover your mouth and nose on the way home and call NHS 111.

In the event of a positive diagnosis will PHE contact the individual's workplace to advise on appropriate action?

If a person tests positive for novel coronavirus, PHE will speak to the patient to identify anyone who has had close contact with them during the time they are considered to be infectious and PHE will contact these people as soon as possible. More information on contact tracing can be found [here](#)

Should we defer elective treatments for patients who have returned from affected countries but are asymptomatic for 14 days?

Yes, if you are aware that a patient has arrived back to the UK from mainland China, Thailand, Japan, Republic of Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia or Macau within the last 14 days please instruct them to follow the [specific advice for returning travellers](#).

If this does become a crisis what is the current thinking on involving the independent sector in supporting the response?

The NHS has always worked with the independent sector to alleviate pressure on the system when needed. We are not at this stage now but if required we would look for support across the whole of the healthcare sector, including the independent sector.

If someone is high risk and has a negative swab, do they need re-testing within 14 days or are they clear?

If they have a negative swab, they do not need re-testing - even if they're from a high-risk zone.

Regarding home care; we deliver to and treat patients at home. Should we be pre-screening home deliveries or patient treatments?

No, most patients you will be treating at home have not come back from a risk area in the last 14 days.

A major part of managing the spread of the coronavirus will be staff education and ensuring that all staff understand the [case definitions](#) and are able to identify patients, in their day to day work, that may cause a risk of this spreading.

Annex 1

Posters

A series of posters have been created for a number of healthcare settings. These are available [here](#).

Telephone system

This message should be added to your phone system. Ideally at the front end (so before a call is answered):

If you've been:

- to Wuhan or Hubei Province in China in the last 14 days (even if you do not have symptoms)
- to other parts of China, including Macau and Hong Kong, in the last 14 days and have a cough, high temperature or shortness of breath (even if it's mild)
- to Thailand, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Republic of Korea or Malaysia in the last 14 days and have a cough, high temperature or shortness of breath (even if it's mild)
- in close contact with someone with confirmed coronavirus

Do not go to a GP surgery, community pharmacy or hospital. Call NHS 111, stay indoors and avoid close contact with other people. Further information is available on [nhs.uk](#).

SMS info

If you wish to send out messages via SMS to your patient list, please use the following:

If you've been:

- to Wuhan or Hubei Province in China in the last 14 days (even if you do not have symptoms)
- to other parts of China, including Macau and Hong Kong, in the last 14 days and have a cough, high temperature or shortness of breath (even if it's mild)
- to Thailand, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Republic of Korea or Malaysia in the last 14 days and have a cough, high temperature or shortness of breath (even if it's mild)
- in close contact with someone with confirmed coronavirus

Please do not attend your appointment, and please call to cancel your appointment. Call NHS 111, stay indoors and avoid close contact with other people.

Further information is available on [nhs.uk](#)

SMS for appointments

If you send out SMS reminders about appointments, please use the following:

If you've been:

- to Wuhan or Hubei Province in China in the last 14 days (even if you do not have symptoms)

- to other parts of China, including Macau and Hong Kong, in the last 14 days and have a cough, high temperature or shortness of breath (even if it's mild)
- to Thailand, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Republic of Korea or Malaysia in the last 14 days and have a cough, high temperature or shortness of breath (even if it's mild)
- in close contact with someone with confirmed coronavirus

Please do not attend your appointment, and please call to cancel your appointment. Call NHS 111, stay indoors and avoid close contact with other people.

Further information is available on [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)

Online booking service

The following message has been shared with providers of online booking services:

Please do not book an appointment or attend your appointment if you've visited or travelled through mainland China, Hong Kong, Japan, Macau, Malaysia, Republic of Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, or Thailand and have symptoms of cough, fever or shortness of breath within 2 weeks of returning, or if you have symptoms of cough, fever or shortness of breath after being in contact with someone with a confirmed case of coronavirus. Please call NHS 111 instead.

You can [read more about coronavirus on nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)

Website

The following message can be added to your website:

[insert your organisation], the NHS and Public Health England (PHE) are extremely well prepared for outbreaks of new infectious diseases. The NHS has put in place measures to ensure the safety of all patients and NHS staff while also ensuring services are available to the public as normal.

The risk to the general public is moderate. If you have arrived back to the UK from mainland China, Thailand, Japan, Republic of Korea, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia or Macau within 14 days, follow the specific advice for returning travellers.

Call 111 now if you've been:

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- to other parts of China, including Macau and Hong Kong, in the last 14 days and have a cough, high temperature or shortness of breath (even if it's mild)
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Further information is available on [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk).

Like the common cold, coronavirus infection usually occurs through close contact with a person with novel coronavirus via cough and sneezes or hand contact. A person can also be infected by touching contaminated surfaces if they do not wash their hands.

The risk of being in close contact with a person with coronavirus or contaminated surfaces is very low at the current time, as members of the public who have visited Wuhan or Hubei province, China are currently in isolation.

Testing of suspected coronavirus cases is carried out in line with strict regulations. This means that suspected cases are kept in isolation, away from public areas of the hospital and returned home also in isolation. Any equipment that come into contact with suspected cases are thoroughly cleaned as appropriate. Specific guidance has also been shared with NHS staff to help safeguard them and others. Patients can be reassured that their safety is a top priority and are encouraged to attend all appointments as usual.

Everyone is being reminded to follow Public Health England advice to:

- Always carry tissues with you and use them to catch your cough or sneeze. Then bin the tissue, and wash your hands, or use a sanitiser gel.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after using public transport. Use a sanitiser gel if soap and water are not available.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Avoid close contact with people who are unwell.

You can find the latest information and advice from Public Health England at [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk).