

COVID-19 press conference (15 December 2021) Q&A Transcript

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLS7i1R1fBI>

Prime Minister Johnson (18:53)

..... Can we go now to questions from the public? Theresa from Starbridge. I'll read Theresa's question. If initial steps to prevent the spread of Omicron in the community have failed, why is the government rolling back on contact self-isolation for Omicron confirmed cases, instead of making self-isolation more widespread for all COVID cases to further slow the spread of all variants? So, I think what you're asking there, Theresa, is why are we going for the daily contact testing instead of the self-isolation period of ten days? That's because we think we can get the same result and we think we can do that without generating what everybody remembers from earlier on this year, the pandemic. And the reason why I think that's a good idea, Theresa, is because as we go into this particularly tough time of year for the NHS and many other organisations, we want to keep supply chains running, we need to keep things moving and a pandemic would really make things much more difficult. So, we think we can tackle it in that way, and we think that's appropriate.

CMO Chris Whitty (20:13)

Well, the only thing I just wanted to add, Prime Minister, was just to reemphasize we're talking here about contacts. If people have got COVID, if they've got symptoms, we would want people to self-isolate because those people have a high risk of transmitting and this is an incredibly transmissible virus.

Prime Minister Johnson (20:30)

Correct. Thank you very much, Theresa. Addie from Nottinghamshire. With the spread of Omicron increasing, what is your plan for the clinically vulnerable? Do you plan on putting shielding back in effect? I think I'm going to hand that straight over to you, Chris and Nikki, if you want to comment.

CMO Chris Whitty (20:46)

Thank you, Prime Minister. What we've decided is that at this point, shielding came with some very serious downsides for the people involved in the shielding, including loneliness and mental health issues, practical problems. So, it's not an area we want to go down if there's any way of avoiding doing so. But there is a lot of things we need to be doing for the clinic of vulnerable, and they include for people immunosuppressed. I think, as most, hopefully most people who are in that situation know, that they should get three doses of vaccine as their primary course, and then subsequently they should get a booster on top of that. So, they should have four doses in comparison to the rest of the population having three. And there will also, for example, be things we'll be wanting to look at in terms of antiviral drugs and how we best can use them in this group of people who are particularly high risk. I don't know whether Nikki, you want to add anything to that, that's fine, thank you.

Prime Minister Johnson (21:40)

Good, thanks very much. Let's go to Laura Kuenssberg, BBC News.

Laura Kuenssberg, BBC News (21:45)

Thanks very much. Prime Minister, as you've said, there have been more cases today than there ever have been. If now isn't the time for extra restrictions, when will be? And to both of the medics, can I ask you, really straightforwardly, do you think it would be better if there were now more restrictions immediately and should the public cut back on their Christmas plans?

Prime Minister Johnson (22:06)

Thanks, Laura, and I'll have a go at that first, and let me explain what we're trying to do. I think this is the right approach, it's a double strategy, it's a left and a right for Omicron. We're going with plan B, as we said we would, in the event of the numbers starting to rise, in the event of a new variant appearing. And that's the right thing to do. And everybody, you'll have heard me repeat earlier on what we need people to do to use ventilation, to wear masks inside, continue to wash your hands, exercise caution, to do daily contact testing and so forth. If you come into contact with somebody who has Omicron, to isolate, certainly if you have Omicron and to get tested when you want to go to a nightclub or another venue, all those restrictions are coming in and that's the right thing to do to slow the

spread of the disease. But what we're also doing is using a tool that we didn't have. Laura, if you think about it, a year ago, when we were also facing a spike, and that is the huge advantage not just of testing, but also of vaccination.

Prime Minister Johnson (23:29)

And the booster the booster does provide all the evidence seems to be the booster does provide an excellent level of protection. And we think that given the balance of risks and the balance of continuing uncertainties about omicron, this is the right approach to take, the right mixture of approaches to do these two things at once. And the progress that we're making with the booster is absolutely vital. These numbers are extraordinary for the British population. I mean, we really are boosting huge numbers of people now. We've got a much higher proportion of our population boosted, as I said at the outset, either than the United States or than the rest of Europe. I think over 90% of the 75- to 79-year-olds have been boosted now. And that's terrific because it's those groups, don't forget, that sadly, provide the bulk of those who are likely to die from COVID. So by getting boosted now, we can really build up our wall of protection whilst we slow down the spread of the disease with Plan B. So, it's a two-pronged effort.

CMO Chris Whitty (24:49)

My answer would be ministers clearly have to choose two really unpalatable options. But what we do not have at the moment is clear data on some of the really key questions. And the two that I think are the most important are what is the hospitalisation of severe disease and in due course, mortality rate with two doses, which we got right the way through the population of existing vaccines? And what are we looking at with a booster on top? Remembering we've now got the great majority of people over 65 boosted and that rate is going up. Those data will come in. There's some very early indications from lab studies, but they're not really strong enough to be able to make strong clinical recommendations. And obviously ministers will take a lot of account of new information as it comes in. In terms of your second bit of your question, I think that what most people are doing is, and I think this seems very sensible, is prioritising the social interactions that really matter to them and to protect those ones, deprioritizing ones that matter much less to them. And I think that's going to become increasingly important as we, for example, go into the Christmas period and people are also taking a lot of precautions, and I think this is exactly right.

CMO Chris Whitty (25:59)

So that, for example, if they're going to visit a group of people or if they're visiting vulnerable people, they're taking tests beforehand, I would strongly encourage that and strongly encourage sensible things like really good ventilation, meeting outdoors, if that's appropriate and easy, and all the things we know that we've done systematically through this. So, I just think a lot of this is people following sensible rules but prioritising the things that really matter to them and deprioritizing the others.

Nikki Kanani, NHS England (26:27)

All I would add is that my patients have had very mixed experiences through previous lockdowns and some have been incredibly isolated and their mental health has really deteriorated. So, everything that we can do as a public, as individuals, to reduce the burden of the disease, to get our boosters and to make those choices that Chris describes is right. I mean, I want to see my immediate family on Christmas Day, so I'm going to be really, really careful until I get to that moment, not just testing, but watching what I do and prioritising, working on the vaccine programme, working in general practise, so that I can get those special moments with my family. And I know that that's what everyone will choose to do if they can, because that's our best way through, along with getting booked for their booster.

Prime Minister Johnson (27:14)

Thanks very much, Robert Peston, ITV.

Robert Peston, ITV (27:19)

The best will in the world, the surge in boosting is not going to kick in for three or four weeks, but now is the moment when people are going to parties, they're going to the pub. Why aren't you more explicitly discouraging them from doing that? Dr Kanani, you said that your colleagues are working incredibly hard, they're exhausted. For 18 months, they've been putting their lives at risk. If I could ask you and Professor Whitty, how did you and they feel when you saw those photos of officials in Downing Street and Conservative Central Office having parties when they were risking their lives and the rest of us were in lockdown? And finally, Prime Minister, would you welcome a police investigation of the parties that took place here?

Prime Minister Johnson (28:08)

So I'm going to ask the Chris, you want to go first?

CMO Chris Whitty (28:12)

I mean, I don't have a huge amount to add to what I said previously, which is I do think people should prioritise what matters and that, by definition, means deprioritise other things. And I think people are doing that and I think I would recommend that, and I think most people would recommend that. Don't think you need a medical degree to realise that is a sensible thing to do with an incredibly infectious virus, about which there are quite a lot of key things we don't know. And then in terms of other areas, yes, I think it's a statement of fact that when people think there's unfairness, and particularly if they think there's unfairness in high places, of course people get angry. I'm not commenting on individual cases or commenting on the rights and wrongs of anything, to be honest, I never have throughout this, and I don't intend to start now. But what I do think is most people actually separate that out from their absolute need to think seriously about what's good for them, their communities, their families, their workplaces and the wider country. And people, I think, really are taking that very seriously. And I don't think those two are in conflict.

CMO Chris Whitty (29:12)

I think people basically can do both simultaneously.

Nikki Kanani, NHS England (29:16)

I think what I would add is that our staff, as I said, have been working for a really long time, both through the pandemic and to deliver this incredible vaccination programme. And I think they'll keep going, whatever else happens nationally in other places, we're here to look after our patients and our public. And that's what drives me every know, no matter what else is going on. And that's what my teams and my colleagues will continue to focus on.

Prime Minister Johnson (29:42)

And I just say to you, Robert, that I think you've completely mischaracterised the events in this place where people, to the best of my knowledge, have worked blindingly hard for a very long time in cooperation with people around government and across the whole of the public services to do our very best to keep people safe. But we'll course hear from the Cabinet Secretary about what he believes has happened. And indeed, if the police think there's anything to follow up, I'm sure that they will. But I think that, if I may say so, I think that the public can readily as I think colleagues have said, the public can readily distinguish between these types of reports and these types of accounts and the overwhelming imperative that we have now together to tackle this disease in the two pronged way that we are. And I think those are the messages that I'm seeing the public understand very, very loud and clear and really responding magnificently with the way people are. You said it'll take two or three weeks for the vaccine rollout to get going. That's not my impression.

Prime Minister Johnson (30:55)

Well, I think actually, I think that that is a moot point because I think that I'd like to hear from Nikki and Chris on that. I believe that with the booster, you start to get at least some immunity, perhaps a bit quicker than you've suggested, but perhaps that would be well.

CMO Chris Whitty (31:13)

I think the general point is a very reasonable one, actually. The timing, yes, I would expect some protection, probably even beginning within a week and quite a bit within two, so it's a bit quicker. But your general point, which is, of course there's going to be a delay, is a fair one. It's just probably slightly less than you were implying.

Nikki Kanani, NHS England (31:29)

Yeah, I mean, all we can do is move as fast as we can so we can get people protected. And that's why the other points that Chris and PM have already made are know, we follow the guidance that's there work from home if you can. We need those trains as empty as possible so essential workers can go in safely. Wear your mask as much as you can and look after each other. That's what we're here to do.

Prime Minister Johnson (31:54)

Thanks. Tom Newton, The Times.

Tom Newton, Times (31:58)

Professor Whitty. Question for you. Jenny Harris today said the Omicron variant was the most significant threat to public health we've seen during the Pandemic. Graham Medley, as you know, Chairs SPI-M has called it a very real possibility of the NHS being overwhelmed. Do you agree with those two statements? And may I also ask you just to give us a little bit more detail on what you said were studies on severity and mortality? You said they weren't complete yet, but can you share with us what you know so far on that? Prime Minister, question for you. I want to bring up the vote last night, sorry about that, but it is relevant to this whole discussion. Now, a lot of your MPs say it wasn't just about Covid passes, it was about you, it was about your leadership. And they want you to change. They want you to run a better operation, about an upper ten and stop putting the car into the ditch, to use your words. Will you change? And if so, how?

CMO Chris Whitty (32:49)

So, on the first one, and echoing a point that Nikki made, this is a really serious threat at the moment. How big a threat? There are several things we don't know, but all the things that we do know are bad. And the principal one being the speed of which this is moving, it is moving at an absolutely phenomenal pace. And therefore, between the time that it first starts to really take off in a way people will be able to see, and the point when we get to very, very large numbers will be quite a short one. And that, I think, is part of the issue in trying to deal with this. So, I certainly echo the fact that this is a very serious threat. I think to compare it to each of the very major threats we've faced. I think it's quite difficult because, as the Prime Minister said, we do have some things going for us this time of which the most important is the existence of effective vaccines and the ability to boost at speed at this stage. But I think I do not wish to underestimate this. And for my NHS colleagues in primary and secondary care, I am afraid there will be an increasing number of Omicron patients going into the NHS, going into hospital, going into intensive cares.

CMO Chris Whitty (33:57)

And the exact ratios we don't yet know. But there will be substantial numbers and that that will begin to become apparent, in my view, fairly soon after Christmas. It'll start before then. But in terms of the big numbers, I think that's a reasonably, I'm afraid, a reasonably nailed on prospect in terms of what I was trying to explain on the severity. And it is a relatively subtle point, but I wanted to make it because I think it's been misunderstood. There are broadly two ways that a virus like this could be less. Severe if someone's caught it, one of which is it's intrinsically less severe. It's just as a milder virus. And there are milder and more severe viruses ranging from ones with 100% mortality rabies, for example, all the way down to ones with essentially 0% mortality. So, you could have a move on that. But the other way, which is much more common, actually, where something becomes more severe, is because we have more immunity. And the point I was making is South Africa, between the last wave and this wave, their degree of immunity has substantially increased and therefore there is much greater South African immunity to COVID in general, not specific to Omicron than there was in the last wave.

CMO Chris Whitty (35:08)

So some decrease in severity you would expect because of some protection from increasing immunity. In contrast, for our delta wave, we already had incredibly good immunity due to the amazing job the NHS has done in double vaccinating everybody, so we don't have that additional thing on top. So it may be that some of, possibly even all of any decreased severity from South Africa is just explained by immunity. And if that's the case, that's not something you would necessarily replicate here. The second thing is from South African data, incidentally, of course, is that their age groups are very different. There are a number of other very major factors, HIV, a whole bunch of other things. So, reading across data, I think, needs to be done with very strong care on mortality. So, we do have hospitalisation data from South Africa. The rates in hospitalizations in South Africa are now going up relatively fast on mortality. We do not yet have data, and that's because this is so recent. And of course, as everybody knows, there's a lag to getting infections, a lag to getting symptoms, a lag to getting to hospital, and then a lag to a minority of people dying.

CMO Chris Whitty (36:13)

And that time frame has not happened. So, we don't yet have data on mortality. And obviously, as soon as we do, we will share it with the public.

Prime Minister Johnson (36:21)

And Tom, just on your point about Parliament, look, I do understand the people's feelings of principle about what they see as infringements on liberty. And we've been trying throughout this pandemic to keep society, keep our lives

as open and as free as possible. And that's the aim of what we're doing. Indeed, the aim of Plan B plus the Get Boosted Now campaign is to ensure that our next year is as free and as open as possible, and we protect our society and our economy in every way that we can. I have to say, I don't think that the measures that were proposing or that were parliament enacted for nightclubs and some other settings like football matches in any way amount to a vaccine passport. Because after all, all you've got to do, you've just got to get a lateral flow test, or if you have proof of vaccination, then you can get in. It's entirely optional. So, I don't follow that line of argument. But I just want to say I'm grateful that Parliament voted it through. Majority of large majority of Conservative votes went to get this done and it will help us to keep the country on track.

Prime Minister Johnson (37:42)

I think if we can do these two things at once, implement Plan B in the way that we're describing, plus get everybody boosted at record speed in the way that we are, we'll be able to move forward and keep on the path that we have begun to travel. Now, that is made possible because of the incredible efforts of the NHS and the British public. And those are the people I really want to thank. I realise I said you were from the Times. In fact, you're from Times Radio now.

Prime Minister Johnson (38:20)

They want you to change. I'm certainly not going to change. Thank you very much, Tom. I'm certainly not going to change the policies that have led to the fastest vaccine rollout in Europe, the fastest booster campaign in Europe now, and delivered 500,000 more people in Jobs now than there were before the pandemic began. And those are the things which I would respectfully suggest that the public also keen to focus on. Steve Swinford of The Times.

Steve Swinford, The Times (38:52)

Professor Whitty. In Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon is advising people to limit household mixing over Christmas. Is that something that you think families should be thinking about as we approach Christmas? To limit the number of other households that they interact with over the Christmas period in their own homes? And, Prime Minister, the last time that you held a press conference, you were saying that people should go ahead as normal with Christmas parties. Now, we've just heard Professor Whitty say we should be deprioritising less important social events. So, do you think that people should still be going ahead with Christmas parties or is it time to cancel Christmas parties? And furthermore, about New Year. What are you thinking about New Year? Should people be planning big social events at New Year, or should they be limiting those now?

CMO Chris Whitty (39:31)

I really think people should be prioritising those things and only those things that really matter to them, because otherwise the risk of someone getting infected at something that doesn't really matter to them and then not being able to do the things that do matter to them obviously goes up. But I don't think you need to be a doctor to think that. I think that's what most people are very sensibly, calculating, and that seems to me a sensible approach, personally. Yeah, the whole point about what the point I'm making is don't mix with people you don't have to for either work or for the sort of family things that really matter to you would be my general advice to people in this kind of situation, but people have to make their own choices.

Prime Minister Johnson (40:15)

Yeah. Thanks, Steve. I agree totally with Chris about the response that we're already seeing from everybody, our general instinct to be more cautious. But I said many times that I thought that this Christmas will be considerably better than last Christmas, and I stick to that. We're not cancelling events, we're not closing hospitality, we're not cancelling people's parties or their ability to mix. What we are saying is, think carefully before you go. What kind of an event is it? Are you likely to meet people who are vulnerable? Are you going to meet loads of people you haven't met before and get a test? And I think that is very, very good. Make sure that there's ventilation, wear a mask on transport and get a test before you go. So, we're in a different environment thanks to the boosters from where we were last year, but we've got to be cautious and think about it whilst we wait for the benefits of the boosters really to kick in. Thank you. Macer Hall. The express.

Macer Hall, The Express (41:31)

Thank you, Prime Minister. If I could ask the medical experts, it's becoming clear that we're going to need to keep having boosters to keep topping up our protection against Coronavirus. What's your best guess for how often we're

going to need to do it? Is it going to be every six months, every three months? And is there a case for a national, permanent national vaccine Service to deliver boosters?

Just pick you up on the you talked about keeping supply chains moving earlier. Obviously, a lot of people there's going to be a lot of work absence as people become infected and have to take time off work. Are you concerned at all that emergency services, essential industries may come under pressure and what steps you're doing to cope with that?

CMO Chris Whitty (42:20)

I think it's not yet clear how often we will need to do boosters. Essentially, there are two separate reasons to need to do a booster. The first one is that the immunity was good, is still good, but is waning. So that's a matter of topping it up from time to time. And then the second one is, as we got with Omicron, something comes in, feels left that actually the vaccines work less effectively against. And you need to do something to actually top it up, to actually get back to where you were before the new variant came in. Now, on the first of those, we don't yet know how long the immunity will take to wane. In general, I think most people who look at this would say that after a booster, the waning may be a bit slower than it was after the second vaccine, but we don't know that. And so, we need to see those data and make decisions on that. And of course, immunity is quite complicated. It's made of several different elements. It's not just antibodies, it's a variety of other ones. But of course, whenever we do get a new variant, for the moment, we have to ask the question, does this need a new vaccine?

CMO Chris Whitty (43:18)

As is being asked at the moment. Now, in the long run, my expectation is, and when? The long run doesn't mean many years, but maybe not this year. In the long run, we would expect that we'll get what's called polyvalent vaccines, where you have multiple different forms of the virus in the same vaccine. And the reason that's important is it makes it a lot harder for the virus to evolve around that. At the moment, we've simply got a single thing based on the original strain. Once we've got those, I think new variants that can do as much change as omicron will probably become rarer. Still may happen from time to time, but we do now have technologies that mean we can move them very quickly. That's a long answer, but I think it's something which a lot of people ask, so I thought it was probably worth laying that out. Dr. Kanani may want to comment on the second bit.

Nikki Kanani, NHS England (44:08)

Yes, thank you. Thank you. I mean, it's something that we are obviously thinking about how do we get the right vaccine infrastructure? Prior to the pandemic, which feels so long ago, we did have a vaccine infrastructure. It was our general practise and community pharmacy teams that would vaccinate children. It was our school teams that go in and vaccinate in schools and obviously our annual flu vaccination. So, we're used to having to do things annually and cyclically. But we are definitely in a different position now. We can't keep using sort of big venues every time. So, we are putting that infrastructure in place. We are asking, obviously, as you've seen, our community pharmacy colleagues to step up. But we're also seeing that other venues are offering their services, not just now, but into the longer term as well. So, as we learn what we need to do to respond to this variant, we'll build the infrastructure in the background so that once we know the sort of pattern that we're going to have to respond to, we'll have that infrastructure in place.

Prime Minister Johnson (45:07)

To your point about supply chains, we're going to throw everything at it to try to sort it out. Actually, some of the issues that we saw earlier in the autumn have started to get better, like the HGV driver shortage. But we are going to make sure that we do everything we can. Recruiting huge numbers of people, for instance, for the NHS, trying to help care, the care sector, so vital that we get the staff there. Daily contact testing rather than self-isolation I think will help. I'm not going to pretend this is going to be necessarily as smooth as everybody would want, but we've got to get through it and repeat the key message. The best thing everybody can do is get boosted. Now get the booster fast as you can and the higher our wall of protection. Andy Woodcock, Independent.

Andrew Woodcock, Independent (45:59)

The medical experts you've suggested that people will be prioritising family get together on Christmas Day itself this year. I think a lot of people out there will be thinking that situation. You have multiple generations coming together from multiple households in close quarters, quite possibly very little ventilation, particularly if it's a cold day. I think people will want reassurance. Is it really advisable for that sort of event to go ahead? And could I ask all three of you,

what are your plans for Christmas Day itself and are those being scaled back and to the Prime Minister? Since the reports of various parties at Downing Street or alleged parties at Downing Street, there have been polls suggesting a fairly sharp fall in public trust in politicians generally and in yourself personally. Keir Starmer today said that you didn't have the trust and authority to lead the country through this crisis. I was wondering, while the questions about alleged rule breaking are still unresolved at Downing Street, that is, are you still confident that you are the right person to be giving instructions and guidance to other people in a way that will maximise public compliance?

Prime Minister Johnson (47:06)

Thank you. Chris and Nikki.

CMO Chris Whitty (47:09)

On Christmas, I didn't say what people would be doing. Some people prioritise Christmas Day and some people prioritise other things. All I was saying was people should prioritise what matters to them and usually that is family, that different people from different traditions will take different approaches. But Christmas is clearly the majority at this time of year. In terms of what realistically, I think there's a high chance that my original Christmas plans with family are going to be interrupted. I hope it's not completely, but we shall see. And I also am very realistic about the fact that in advance of the situation where large numbers of people enter hospital, very large numbers of people in society, and that includes doctors, nurses and other healthcare workers are going. To get COVID at the same time because this will be a very sharp peak and there will be significant problems of people actually providing staff to man and to generally be able to look after any part of the health and social care system. And so, people like me should keep some degree of flexibility to actually deal with the fact that actually we may end up with quite substantial gaps in rotors at short notice.

CMO Chris Whitty (48:21)

And I just think that is unfortunately, given what my and this is back to Nikki's point, given how much difficulty my health and social care colleagues have had over the last two years, saying that is pretty depressing because they have really, really had to stand up and go back again and again. But the reality is this speed of an onset is going to lead to lots of people getting ill simultaneously, and we have to be realistic about that.

Nikki Kanani, NHS England (48:50)

Thank you, Andy. This is our chance to make choices for each other and for our NHS. So, my advice would be, if you're going to go to a stadium at the weekend, make it one where you can get your vaccine or help out to give a vaccine rather than going to watch a match. And to that point, if you're a role model in society, please get your vaccine, because actually, it's dependent on all of us to show the way right now and to make decisions that help to protect society. As for my Christmas plans, they're already scaling back. There will be far fewer things that I'll do with my children as we run up to Christmas, and if they're listening, sorry, but that is absolutely a fact. But we will enjoy it together and we'll enjoy it at home, and we will enjoy it safely. And as and when I need to work over the Christmas period, I will be just as my colleagues will be, because that's what we're here to do. So, everyone just book your booster now, because that is our best way to protect our NHS and to protect the people who are giving all of their time and energy to look after our public.

Prime Minister Johnson (49:52)

Yeah, Andy. As for my own Christmas plans, I think the way things are looking, I expect a lot of us are going to be working throughout the period. My own plans, as you can imagine, are pretty modest at this stage. But on your point about rules, look, I think everybody I follow the rules. Everybody across politics, across politics should follow the rules. But what I notice actually, is that the British public, in response to what I said, what we said on Sunday, have really got the point that this wave is coming in, that there are two things that we need to do, that we need to implement Plan B that's now going ahead. But everybody also needs to be getting vaccinated, getting the booster. And I think the numbers are extraordinary. People are queuing around the block, across the country, in towns and cities, across the UK. And every day we're adding more and more people, more and more volunteers. 33,000 now coming forward, another 20,000 people coming forward to help get Jabs in arms. And that message is unquestionably. Getting through to people, it is a fantastic thing. It's absolutely vital that people hear it loud and clear.

Prime Minister Johnson (51:18)

So I'm going to repeat it get boosted now. Thank you all very much. Thank you.