

PHS Public Health Alert

Title	Description
Event	COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus) – Variant of Concern (VOC202101/01) – Brazil and other linked countries
Alert reference number	2021/03
Recipients of this alert	CPHMs, HPTs SMVN NCTC ARHAI at NSS Infection Control Managers Infection Control Nurses SG CMO, SG HPT Liaison Team NHS24 SAS IPC team, SAS operational managers ICM ID Physicians HPS Consultants, HPS OOH1/OOH2 PHS Media Relations team
Alert status	4. for action - monitoring, wider dissemination and specific measures to be taken by recipient
Action required of initial recipients	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Details of action needed as below • Cascade to others for action as above
Date of issue	16 January 2021
Source of event information	Scottish Government Public Health England
Contact	Office hours: PHS/HPS Incident room 0141 300 1414 PHS/HPS coronavirus mailbox (phs.hpscoronavirus@phs.scot) Out of hours: HPS on call – 0141 211 3600 GPs seeking further advice or information should contact their local HPT in the first instance
Authorised by	Jim McMenamin
HPZone context	COVID-19 South America travel

Summary

This updated briefing note provides information on important developments:

A new highly transmissible variant of SARS-CoV-2 has been identified in Brazil with evidence of rapid spread. To minimise its ingress and wider spread in the UK, the following actions are outlined.

Situation

A new COVID-19 variant of concern (VOC202101/01) has been identified in Brazil with evidence of rapid spread there. A precautionary approach has been taken in the UK by the 4 Nations in terms of travel regulations, with implementation of public health actions as outlined below for travellers returning from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guiana, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay and Venezuela and other countries and territories with strong travel links to South America; namely Portugal, including Azores and Madeira, Panama, Cabo Verde (Cape Verde) and the British Overseas Territory of the Falkland Islands.

This highlights the continuing and not unexpected picture of viral mutation for COVID-19 and new variants are likely to continue to emerge. This continuous assessment of the implications of virus identification and transmission provides new information and will be shared as required for public health actions. The increased transmissibility of certain variants is a cause of concern for which such travel restrictions and infections control measures remain key. No known cases of this variant have been detected the UK to date.

Information to date outlines that the mechanisms of transmission of the novel variants are the same as the wild-type SARS-CoV-2 and this is being reviewed continuously. It is important that healthcare settings ensure that all infection prevention and control measures are followed, that appropriate personal protective equipment is worn by healthcare staff at all times, that cleaning and ventilation are optimised. Patients and visitors are also advised to wear masks (or face coverings) at all times unless clinically impossible to do so. Symptom vigilance and staying at home and getting tested when symptoms arise initially for suspected cases (and their household contacts when relevant) are key actions for all. Confirmed cases will be followed-up in the usual manner by Test and Protect (NCTC and HPTs, as required) for wider contact tracing and self-isolation for 10 days.

Regulations introduced at 4am on Friday 15 January 2021 require returning travellers who have entered the UK from the above-noted countries and territories and their household contacts to quarantine for 10 days, in law. Unlike travel into Scotland from other countries, there are no sectoral exemptions to the quarantine regulations for people travelling from these locations, which are now defined as 'acute risk countries' under schedule A2 of The Health Protection (Coronavirus) (International Travel) (Scotland) Regulations 2020. Further information is

available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-public-health-checks-at-borders/>

Also from 4 am on 15 January, the UK Government introduced a travel ban on all non-British and Irish nationals, visa holders and permanent residents who arrive in the UK from the above-noted countries and territories.

From information sources available to them, NCTC (the National Contact tracing Centre) in Scotland are contacting all those identified as having returned from the above-noted countries and territories since 5 January onwards to advise them of updated advice and regulations where these apply. This includes self-isolation for the travellers and their household contacts initially for 10 days, COVID-19 testing of the travellers whether symptomatic or not. NCTC scripts have been amended to include this advice.

A 4 nations approach is being taken across the UK for this enhanced surveillance.

Recommendations

Advice for the General Public

For information on COVID-19, the public should be directed to NHS Inform or if online access is not available to call the NHS24 dedicated Coronavirus Helpline on 0800 028 2816. The general advice is to implement Government advice and restrictions, particularly to stay at home and get tested, if COVID-19 symptoms develop.

In line with current restrictions in Scotland, only essential travel should be undertaken.

Actions for travellers returning from affected areas

Self-isolation for 10 days is required for all travellers returning from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guiana, Guyana, Paraguay, Peru, Suriname, Uruguay and Venezuela and other countries and territories with strong travel links to South America; namely Portugal, including Azores and Madeira, Panama, Cabo Verde (Cape Verde) and the British Overseas Territory of the Falkland Islands. This is a legal requirement for those entering from 4 am on 15th January 2021 onwards. As for all regulatory self-isolation, day 1 of the 10 days of self-isolation for returning travellers is the day after departure from the non-exempt country or territory.

Testing for those who have returned to the UK since 5 January onwards from the above-mentioned countries and territories is strongly advised if COVID symptoms arise at any point, or on day 7 after arrival if returning travellers have remained asymptomatic. Testing can be arranged in the usual manner via NHS Inform at <https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and->

Returning travellers who need medical attention for any reason should make it clear to those treating them that they have recently travelled from the above-noted countries and territories. Elective appointments for such individuals should be postponed until after the self-isolation period is complete, if clinically safe to do so.

Actions for anyone who has been in contact with a confirmed case

As per usual COVID-19 guidance – self-isolation for 10 days, seeking a test if symptoms arise. If a returning traveller is found to be PCR positive on testing their close contacts also require to be tested, regardless of symptoms.

Clinical and Laboratory Guidance

- Individuals should not be seeking routine outpatient, ambulatory or primary care, elective treatment while in their 10 day period of self-isolation after return from the above-noted countries and territories. Primary and secondary care organisations are asked to assess whether an individual has returned from one of these countries and delay elective and non-urgent treatment until after the 10 days of self-isolation.
- Any individual with a travel history from the above-noted countries and territories in the preceding 10 days to arrival in the UK OR individuals who have had contact with an individual with such a travel history in the previous 10 days, who requires emergency assessment or admission to hospital should be managed in strict isolation in a single room with en-suite facilities.
- The current COVID-19 personal protective equipment (PPE) guidance applies.
- If hospital admission is indicated, COVID-19 PCR testing on admission (for anyone not already identified as a COVID-19 case) is required. Current PCR assays in use are effective for such testing.
- As well as informing the local Infection Prevention and Control Team, hospital colleagues should contact their local Health Protection Team with the details of admitted individuals who test positive and who have returned from the above-noted countries or territories OR been in contact with someone who has returned, for further public health advice. Further risk assessment and discussion with the local/regional specialist infectious diseases centre is advised to inform further clinical management.
- PCR positive samples from individuals who have returned from the above-noted countries or territories, or are contacts of such individuals, must be sent for whole genome sequencing.

Contact tracing

- Where information is available to do so, travellers returning to the UK from the above-noted countries or territories in the preceding 10 days, will be contacted by NCTC initially via SMS follow-up and phone call, to advise them to self-isolate along with their household. They are also being advised to arrange PCR testing for COVID-19 in the usual manner via NHS Inform if they develop COVID symptoms or on day 7 after their return if they remain asymptomatic. This communication is being undertaken by the NCTC, and PHS have supported the development of relevant scripts.
- NCTC call handlers have been advised that any case who has travelled from the above-noted countries or territories in the previous 10 days should be managed as a complex situation and escalated to the NCTC team lead for HPT follow-up.

Information for HPTs, including Testing arrangements

- HPTs should be aware that cases with a history of travel from the above-noted countries or territories will be escalated to them by NCTC for contact tracing, as a complex setting.
- HPTs may also receive calls arising from NCTC's work as described above to support self-isolation and PCR testing of returning travellers who have been in the above-noted countries or territories.
- Individuals who have travelled from the above-noted countries or territories in the 10 days prior to return to the UK must self-isolate along with their household contacts. The returning travellers should arrange PCR testing in the usual manner via NHS Inform through UK Gov facilities if COVID symptoms develop, or on day 7 following arrival they do not.
- If any returning traveller from the above-noted countries or territories is positive on PCR testing, arrangements are to be made by HPTs for PCR testing of their household contacts. Where PHS are aware of the positive cases, we will liaise with PHS Laboratory Cell colleagues to expedite sequencing. HPTs are asked to inform PHS of all positive cases from the above-noted counties or territories via phs.hpscovid@phs.scot.

Reporting of results

- Results of PCR tests undertaken via UKGov will follow the usual process for reporting.

Context

NHS Inform Coronavirus (COVID-19) - <https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/infections-and-poisoning/coronavirus-covid-19>

HPS Coronavirus (COVID-19) - <https://www.hps.scot.nhs.uk/a-to-z-of-topics/covid-19/>

Scottish Government Coronavirus in Scotland - <https://www.gov.scot/coronavirus-covid-19/>

Scottish Government Ban on entry introduced for visitors from Brazil and several other countries
<https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-public-health-checks-at-borders/>

UK Government COVID-19 Variant information -
<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/new-sars-cov-2-variant> and
<https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ssi/2021/19/contents/made>

UK Government Foreign Office (by foreign country) - <https://www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice>

ECDC page on Novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV): <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/novel-coronavirus-china>

WHO page on Coronavirus (including the 2019-nCoV outbreak): <https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus>