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Covid-19 marshals patrolling the streets of central London in June

MORE than 100 people per day are expected to die and more than 1000 a day be admitted to hospital in England at the peak of the UK’s current wave of covid-19 cases, the government’s scientific advisers are anticipating.

Modelling released by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergency (SAGE) on 12 July gives the first detailed look at the possible impacts from around 100,000 cases per day, the number that UK health secretary Sajid Javid has warned the country could hit when restrictions lift in England on 19 July. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have different plans for relaxing rules.

Cases aren’t expected to peak until mid-August at the earliest, as Covid-19 spreads to younger people who aren’t yet vaccinated (see page 8).

The high level of vaccination and more younger people being infected mean the link between cases and hospitalisations and deaths has been weakened, but not broken. There now appears to be a fourfold lower chance of hospitalisations and roughly tenfold lower chance of deaths than during the second wave.

There remains a high level of uncertainty over the predicted size of the UK’s third wave as restrictions are lifted. This uncertainty stems partly from small differences in the efficacy and uptake of vaccines making a big difference to epidemiological models. One possibility is that there are more unvaccinated people than modellers think, because population numbers aren’t yet available from the census for England, Wales and Northern Ireland done earlier this year.

However, the biggest uncertainty is to do with people’s behaviour when restrictions are waived. A central estimate of between 1000 and 2000 hospital admissions a day and 100 to 200 deaths a day in England when cases peak is based on the assumption that behaviour will change slowly over several months, rather than suddenly.

This means the modelling is assuming that people will still isolate if they have symptoms or test positive, wear masks in crowded places – despite it no longer being a legal requirement – and people who can work from home will largely continue to do so.

“There is huge uncertainty as to how people’s behaviour is likely to change,” says Susan Michie at University College London. “On the one hand, people have overwhelmingly behaved responsibly in the past when they could see there was a threat. On the other hand, we are receiving very mixed messages from the government in terms of them doing one thing and saying another.”

A total of 228,189 cases were reported in the UK in the past 7 days, up 28.1 per cent on the week before. Hospital admissions over the same period are at 3081, up 56.6 per cent, with deaths at 200, up 56.2 per cent. In England, 1 in 160 people are estimated to be infected.

SAGE expects the prevalence of the virus to “almost certainly remain extremely high” this summer, and believes that such high levels pose four major risks. Those are a greater number of hospitalisations and deaths, more people with long covid, more chance of variants developing and a higher pressure on workforces due to absences.

However, the peak of deaths in the third wave is expected to be “considerably smaller” than in January 2021, when few people were vaccinated.

Coronavirus in the UK

Cases will spike in August

The UK faces a large wave of covid-19 cases and deaths in the weeks after lockdown lifts in England, reports Adam Vaughan

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