Since January 2020 Elsevier has created a COVID-19 resource centre with free information in English and Mandarin on the novel coronavirus COVID-19. The COVID-19 resource centre is hosted on Elsevier Connect, the company’s public news and information website.

Elsevier hereby grants permission to make all its COVID-19-related research that is available on the COVID-19 resource centre - including this research content - immediately available in PubMed Central and other publicly funded repositories, such as the WHO COVID database with rights for unrestricted research re-use and analyses in any form or by any means with acknowledgement of the original source. These permissions are granted for free by Elsevier for as long as the COVID-19 resource centre remains active.
THE UK government hadn’t reported the number of people outside of hospitals and care homes being tested for covid-19 for more than two weeks when New Scientist went to press.

On 23 May, the government cited difficulties with data collection, but the suspension in reporting was later put down to the fact that it had been double counting some people who had had more than one test. Asked when the publishing hiatus would end, the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) didn’t say and referred New Scientist to its website.

The quality and transparency of official statistics on coronavirus testing in the UK have been called into question over the past two months. A target of 100,000 tests a day by the end of April was only met by including in the count ones that had been posted but not processed. David Norgrove, the chair of official statistics watchdog the UK Statistics Authority, has twice written to health minister Matt Hancock to complain about figures he says are “far from complete and comprehensible” and “well short” of expectations.

Officially, more than 5.7 million tests have been conducted in the UK so far, with 142,123 tests on 6 June. But those simple totals mask a complex series of different tests. A sizeable chunk of that daily count, 26,802, are antibody tests carried out under testing strategy pillars 3 and 4. Pillar 3 tests are used to see if someone has previously had the coronavirus and pillar 4 ones for research on its spread. Such tests are of no benefit for detecting or tracing new cases, or advising someone on whether they should self-isolate.

The majority of the tests on 6 June – 79,685 in all – were “have you got it” nose-and-throat swab tests for people outside of hospitals, known as pillar 2. Those include ones posted to people at home, although these may not ever be taken or processed. There has also been a degree of double counting – for example, separate swabs of a person’s nose and throat may be counted as two tests.

The remaining 35,636 tests on 6 June were swab tests to confirm infection among hospital patients and staff, called pillar 1. When tests are combined and counted up in this way, the UK government has been able to say it has met its targets – the most recent of these was 200,000 daily tests by the end of May. But without knowing how many people are being tested and to what extent double counting and unprocessed tests contribute to the totals, it is difficult for independent experts to say whether enough testing is taking place to understand and control the UK outbreak. “If we want to know the infection fatality rate, we can only guess at the moment,” says Jason Oke at the University of Oxford.

In addition, he says, for monitoring how the country comes out of lockdown, “what we really need to do is have a system where we can monitor potential spikes in positive cases. We can only do that if we have clear data on who’s getting tested and how many people are getting tested, not just total numbers of tests.”

“The current reporting standard is far short of what is required,” says Sheila Bird at the University of Cambridge. There is no breakdown of which pillar 1 tests were for patients and which for healthcare professionals, she says, meaning there is no way of seeing, for instance, whether improved availability of personal protective equipment has helped reduce the rate of health workers testing positive over time. For pillar 1 tests, we know when they were processed, but not when they were swabbed, she adds.

Other unknowns include the total number of people tested so far, the number of people who have been tested more than once and the number of people who have returned postal tests. John Newton at Public Health England told MPs that more than half of posted tests are returned – but the figure had still not been made public by 9 June despite him promising it over a fortnight before.

The DHSC says that it is considering Norgrove’s latest letter and will respond in due course. A spokesperson says that the testing statistics “are presented in the best and most transparent way possible”. }

---

**5.7 million tests have been counted in the UK so far – including unmade ones**

---

**Live samples from people being tested for coronavirus in Glasgow, UK**