



The BMJ

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2020;371:m4296<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m4296>

Published: 05 November 2020

## Covid-19: NHS is placed on highest alert level as intensive care beds fill up

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The NHS has been placed on the highest alert level amid warnings that some hospitals are now seeing more patients with covid-19 than they did at the height of the pandemic in April.

Intensive care beds in England are filling up because of the rising number of patients being admitted with covid-19, health service leaders warned. NHS England's chief executive, Simon Stevens, said that the NHS currently had the equivalent of 22 hospitals full of patients with covid and that it was "once again facing a serious situation."

He told a media briefing on Wednesday 4 November, "The facts speak for themselves. In early September we had under 500 coronavirus patients in our hospitals. By the beginning of October that had become 2000. And now it is around 11 000. That's the equivalent of 22 of our hospitals full of coronavirus patients."

"That is the reason why, after midnight tonight, the health service in England will be returning to its highest level of emergency preparedness, which we had to be at between the end of January and the end of July."

The move back to level 4 means that NHS England will once again have overall coordination of the NHS's response to the pandemic and can move staff or patients to other regions if local services are stretched because of covid.

### Surge capacity

Stephen Powis, NHS medical director for England, warned that the available capacity would be stretched in every area of England without urgent action.

"Unless we can control the virus and bend that curve it will start to move into our surge capacity, and it will mean, unfortunately, that we will be postponing some of our routine services," he said. "That is already happening in areas of the north west that are under particular pressure. The key to this is to control infection rates."

Stevens added that the NHS had made great strides over the summer to catch up on delayed treatment and resume routine operations, as well as developing new treatments and extra facilities for treating patients who have covid.

He said, "We want to try and ensure that the health service is there for everybody, minimising the disruption to the full range of care that we provide. The truth, unfortunately, is that if coronavirus takes off again, that will disrupt services."

Alison Pittard, consultant in intensive care medicine in Leeds and dean of the Faculty of Intensive Care Medicine, told the briefing that hospitals including her own were already having to cancel some planned surgery because of rising covid cases.

She said, "This is something that we just do not want to do. We've seen the unintended consequences of this from the first wave and the stress and upset that that causes to all."

"We can't stop cancer from developing, we can't stop a heart attack or a stroke, but we can reduce the prevalence and therefore the transmission of covid in the community. And that is what we need to do to be able to care for everyone who needs us."