

UK virus toll over 41,000, with 10,000 care homes deaths

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Britain's official coronavirus death toll is at least 41,000 with almost 10,000 dead in care homes in England and Wales alone, according to a statistical update released on Tuesday.

Some 41,020 deaths where COVID-19 was mentioned on the death certificate were registered across the UK by May 8, according to the Office for National Statistics (ONS).

With hundreds of deaths still being reported each day, it means the current toll, already the highest in Europe and second only to the United States in the global rankings, is likely to be even higher.

The government's official rolling tally only records deaths after positive tests, and on Tuesday stood at 35,341, up 545 on the day before.

The ONS figures show a sharp fall in coronavirus deaths in the week up to May 8, reinforcing ministers' claims that Britain is past the peak.

Deaths in care homes fell at a slower rate than the population at large, and the total number of deaths in care homes in England and Wales now stands at 9,975.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government has come under intense criticism for its handling of the outbreak, notably for the time it took to introduce widespread testing.

A cross-party parliamentary committee on Tuesday criticised the decision to initially concentrate testing in a limited number of laboratories.

"From it followed the decision on March 12 to cease testing in the community and retreat to testing principally within hospitals," it said, warning this left care home residents untested.

At the government's daily media briefing, England's deputy chief scientific adviser, Angela McLean, admitted that limited capacity had driven strategy on testing.

"It was the best thing to do with the tests that we had. We could not have people in hospital with Covid symptoms not knowing whether or not they had Covid," she said.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock earlier told parliament he was encouraged that care home deaths were falling.

A total of 62 percent of care homes in England had no reported cases of COVID-19 at all, he added.

Just over a quarter (27 percent) of all deaths in England from the virus were in such places, compared with a European average of about half, he told MPs.

"We will not rest from doing whatever is humanly possible to protect our care homes from this appalling virus," he said.

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