

Dear Residents,

St Helens currently has one of the highest coronavirus rates in the country, so we must continue to be vigilant and continue to wash our hands, cover our faces and make space. It's crucial to self-isolate if you are instructed to by NHS Test and Trace, the COVID-19 app, your workplace or school. It will break the link in the chain - stopping the spread of coronavirus, protecting our NHS, and saving lives.

The vaccine rollout is going tremendously well, but the vaccine doesn't stop the virus from spreading, and many people show no symptoms so can be passing it on without knowing. We have been alerted to a new variant of Covid-19 that has been found across Merseyside, including here in St Helens Borough, and other areas of the North West.

There is currently no indication that this version of the virus is more transmissible or results in more serious illness but work is ongoing to identify if the variant is more resistant to antibodies. This mutation of the virus is different to the South African variant, which has been identified in Southport and other places in the UK this week.

It is common for viruses to mutate, I don't want people to get concerned but we need to all play our part by always ensuring we keep to the rules and get tested when we have symptoms no matter how mild. This way regardless of the mutation of the virus we will bring the infection rates down in our community. But as part of this we are urging anyone who is feeling unwell to get a Covid-19 test, even if they aren't showing the classic symptoms.

The three main symptoms of Covid-19 are:

- a high temperature,
- a persistent cough
- or a loss of smell or taste.

But there are other symptoms that have been reported by people who have tested positive, such as:

- a persistent headache,
- diarrhoea,
- fever and chills,
- shortness of breath or difficulty breathing,
- fatigue, muscle or body aches,
- sore throat, congestion or runny nose
- nausea or vomiting.

You can read the other symptoms on the World Health Organisation website.

If you do feel unwell, even if your symptoms are mild, please book a traditional PCR test online. It's important that you do not use the symptom free test sites if you are feeling unwell.

You can book a free test by calling 119, book online at www.gov.uk/get-coronavirus-test or through the government's NHS Covid app: www.nhs.uk/apps-library/nhs-covid-19

When you are booking a test online, say you do not have the classic symptoms, then in follow up pages choose the option which says 'My local council or health protection team has asked me (or someone I live with) to get a test, even though I do not have symptoms'.

It's vital we catch cases quickly and then follow the isolation rules for the entire household to prevent the spread. If you're worried about losing out on pay if you cannot work, check to see if you are eligible for a £500 payment if you test positive.

Also, if you are isolated by coronavirus and are in urgent need or are vulnerable and you are self-isolating, call the St Helens Together helpline for support on 01744 676767 (open 8am-10pm, 7 days a week).

Stay home, stay safe, stop the spread.

Sue Forster
Director of Public Health
St Helens