

UK is first country to deliberately infect volunteers with COVID

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It is hoped the so-called human challenge study will help boost the development of vaccines and treatments for COVID-19. (Photo: Kirsty Wigglesworth/AP)

London, February 18 (RHC)-- The United Kingdom is set to become the first country in the world to deliberately expose volunteers to the novel coronavirus in a so-called human challenge study hoped to aid the development of vaccines and treatments.

Up to 90 healthy volunteers aged between 18 and 30 will be exposed to the virus in a "safe and controlled environment" during the trial, which will begin within a month, the Department for Business, Energy and

Industrial Strategy (BEIS) said in a statement on Wednesday.

The UK's clinical trials ethics body has approved the study, which will use the lowest amount of virus needed to cause an infection, BEIS said. Participants will be exposed to the original, first-wave strain that has been circulating in the UK since March 2020, which is of low risk in healthy young adults.

The study is also hoped to lead to a greater understanding of how the coronavirus is passed between people. Similar studies in the past have played a critical role in the development of treatments for other diseases, including malaria, cholera and the flu.

The government has invested £33.6 million (\$46.6m) in the research, which is being managed by the UK government's Vaccine Taskforce, Imperial College London, the Royal Free London NHS Foundation Trust and hVIVO, a company that has pioneered viral human challenge models. "We expect these studies to offer unique insights into how the virus works and help us understand which promising vaccines offer the best chance of preventing the infection," said Clive Dix, the interim chair of the Vaccine Taskforce.

The UK has recorded more than four million cases of COVID-19 since the pandemic began. Nearly 120,000 people have died nationwide, marking one of the world's worst death tolls. Concerns are mounting as a mutation known as the Kent variant rips through the country, a development which prompted British Prime Minister Boris Johnson to enforce a third national lockdown on January 4.

But Johnson's government has won praise by moving quickly to vaccinate more than 15 million people with at least one dose of the two jabs currently in use in the country – produced by Oxford-AstraZeneca and Pfizer-BioNTech respectively – since December 8.

The UK's medicines regulator has also approved the use of the inoculation produced by Moderna, although supplies of that vaccine have not yet been delivered.

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