

TEST BY CHOICE:

ON RISING CORONAVIRUS CASES IN INDIA

India needs a more nuanced approach to COVID-19 testing

On September 4, India crossed four million novel coronavirus cases, 13 days after crossing three million on August 22. On Saturday, the fresh cases reported surpassed China's total recorded cases (90,070) so far. On Sunday, India surpassed Brazil to record the second highest number of cases in the world. Since August, India has been reporting the highest number of cases each day, which has been steadily increasing — from over 50,000 in the last week of July to over 60,000 in the first week of August, over 70,000 in the fourth week, before jumping to over 80,000 cases in September. Though the number of tests done each day has been over one million for the past week, the test positivity rate nationally is still high at 7.7%, indicating that testing has to be ramped up. Though the testing done each day by many States has been growing, nearly 50% of them are rapid antigen, of only about 50-60% sensitivity. Unfortunately, with no repeat testing of negative cases and only a small percentage of people with symptoms but negative results being validated with a RT-PCR, many of the infected are not being diagnosed.

The ICMR's latest advisory provides for testing on demand to "ensure higher levels of testing". While ramping up testing is needed, testing on demand by anyone might not be the correct approach to adopt. The ICMR is theoretically making India's 1.3 billion people eligible for a test, even when there is no capacity to undertake this. While it is a welcome measure, especially in the private sector, the general fear about infection might result in diverting some of the government's stretched health resources if it has to test those who do not, on the face of it, require a test. With States not validating the negative results from rapid antigen tests with RT-PCR, non-directed tests on demand might help more in increasing the number of tests done each day and hence in reducing the test positivity rate than in early detection and containment. The focus must remain on diagnosing the most probable cases listed out by the ICMR — those with symptoms or at high risk. Since many of those infected have mild or no symptoms, tests on demand might be particularly helpful in detecting cases that might otherwise have been missed. But such a strategy should be restricted to clusters, hotspots, and containment zones, besides dense urban areas with anticipated high transmission in the unlock phase. Else, States might be forced to use their discretionary power to deny tests for people not exhibiting symptoms or in low-risk categories, or selectively charge for testing to pay for procurement of testing kits and to avoid more pressure on the testing infrastructure. There is also the possibility of an over-reliance on antigen testing to cope with the growing demand for testing. A more nuanced approach to testing guidelines is therefore necessary.

Meanings of Difficult Words:

- ❖ **by choice** (phrase) – voluntarily, by preference, of one's own choice.
- ❖ **nuanced** (adjective) – delicate, subtle.
- ❖ **surpass** (verb) – be greater than, exceed, go beyond.
- ❖ **novel coronavirus** (nCoV) (SARS-CoV-2) (noun) – a new strain (type/variety) coronavirus that has not been previously identified in humans. (Courtesy: **WHO**)
- ❖ **so far** (phrase) – until now, up to the present, up to this point.
- ❖ **positivity rate** (noun) – the proportion of positives to total tests done for a disease; the percentage of tests that are turning out to be positive for a disease.
- ❖ **antigen** (noun) – disease causing organisms (bacteria & viruses) and other harmful/toxic foreign substances like insect venom that induce an immune response in the body.
- ❖ **rapid antigen test (RAT)** (noun) – It is a test on swabbed nasal samples that detects antigens (foreign substances that induce an immune response in the body) that are found on or within the SARS-CoV-2 virus. It is a point-of-care test, performed outside the conventional laboratory setting, and is used to quickly obtain a diagnostic result. In a reliable rapid antigen detection test, the maximum duration for interpreting a positive or negative test is 30 minutes.

- ❖ **ramp up** (phrasal verb) – increase (in amount or number).
- ❖ **sensitivity** (noun) – In medical diagnosis, test sensitivity is the ability of a test to correctly identify those with the disease (true positive rate).
- ❖ **validate** (verb) – prove or confirm the accuracy of something.
- ❖ **RT-PCR testing** (noun) – Reverse Transcription Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR) Testing; it is one of the most accurate laboratory methods for detecting, tracking, and studying the coronavirus. It is a nuclear-derived method for detecting the presence of specific genetic material from any pathogen, including a virus. (pathogen is a bacteria/virus that causes disease).
- ❖ **diagnose** (verb) – identify, determine, detect (an illness).
- ❖ **advisory** (noun) – official communication, announcement, notification, press release, bulletin.
- ❖ **on demand** (phrase) – when required; when needed; when asked for.
- ❖ **theoretically** (adverb) – conceptually notionally.
- ❖ **undertake** (verb) – engage in, become involved in, take part in; begin/start, embark on.
- ❖ **result in** (verb) – cause, bring about, produce.
- ❖ **stretched** (adjective) – strained, overtaxed, overtired, fatigued, tired out, drained, exhausted.
- ❖ **on the face of it** (phrase) – apparently, seemingly, evidently/ostensibly; at first glance.
- ❖ **measure** (noun) – action, step, procedure.
- ❖ **non-directed** (adjective) – not-directed, not-regulated.
- ❖ **non-directed test** (noun) – test without the prescription by a registered medical practitioner.
- ❖ **containment** (noun) – an act of keeping something (harmful) under control (it means quickly identifying cases of coronavirus through testing, placing infected individuals in isolation, tracking who infected persons might have been in contact with and potentially quarantining those who came into contact with infection so that the disease doesn't continue to spread).
- ❖ **probable** (adjective) – possible, expected, predictable, foreseeable, anticipated.
- ❖ **cluster** (noun) – a group (of people/things considered as a unit).
- ❖ **hotspot** (noun) – a limited region/area in which a large number of people have tested positive for COVID-19 in several smaller groups or clusters. In general, hotspot means “a place of significant activity”.
- ❖ **containment zone** (noun) – infected zone; a defined area surrounding the initial cases (of a pandemic) to restrict the virus from spreading beyond its limits.
- ❖ **besides** (preposition) – in addition to, apart from.
- ❖ **anticipated** (adjective) – expected/predicted.
- ❖ **discretionary** (adjective) – optional, voluntary, non-mandatory, up to the individual.
- ❖ **discretionary power** (noun) – a power that a person can use if that person thinks that it is suitable given the situation and circumstances.
- ❖ **exhibit** (verb) – show, display (a symptom/sign).
- ❖ **procurement** (noun) – the action of procuring/purchasing something.
- ❖ **over-reliance** (noun) – excessive dependency.
- ❖ **cope with** (verb) – deal with, grapple with, handle/manage.
- ❖ **necessary** (adjective) – required, compulsory, mandatory, imperative.

DEAL IN DANGER: ON POST-BREXIT U.K.-EU TRADE DEAL

**A no-deal Brexit has economic costs and puts at risk
the hard-won peace in Northern Ireland**

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's move to set an October 15 deadline for reaching a post-Brexit U.K.-EU trade deal has raised fears of a no-deal scenario. While his threat hangs like the

sword of Damocles above the negotiating teams, the British government is reportedly planning a piece of legislation that would overwrite parts of the withdrawal agreement — the divorce deal signed between the U.K. and the EU last year. The agreement had sought to avoid a hard border coming up between Northern Ireland, which is part of the U.K., and the Irish Republic, an EU member. According to the Northern Ireland protocol, signed alongside the agreement, the region is expected to follow some EU rules in trade with the Irish Republic. The hard Brexiteers in Mr. Johnson's Conservative Party were critical of this clause, claiming that it endangers the U.K.'s sovereignty. Now, the planned domestic legislation, the Internal Market and Finances Bill, will allow U.K. courts to follow new U.K. laws rather than the divorce agreement. Northern Ireland leaders have already called it a "betrayal". The real risk of cutting the region off the EU customs code is that physical checks could emerge between the two Irelands, threatening the Good Friday agreement that brought peace.

Though the U.K. formally exited the union, it continues to abide by the EU rules during the transition period, which ends in December. The challenge is to reach a trade deal in the absence of which WTO trade rules will kick in, starting January. With weeks to go before the deadline, there is still no consensus on issues such as workers' rights, environmental regulations, state aid to businesses and the Irish border. While the EU wants the U.K. to adopt rules that are close to its own to ensure a "level playing field" in trade, the British government argues that the whole point of the EU divorce was to break free from common rules. Regarding Northern Ireland, the hard Brexiteers are opposed to any special treatment to the region. The new legislation suggests that the government is hardening its position on Ireland as well. Driven by English nationalist fervour, the British leadership appears to be blind to the economic and political consequences of its hard line. The Brexiteers have already pushed the U.K. into an unenviable position in Europe. A no-deal exit will inflict severe economic costs on the British, at a time when the economy is in dire straits due to COVID-19. Besides, it risks disrupting peace in the island of Ireland. Mr. Johnson and his cabinet should ask themselves whether the no-deal risk is worth taking. They should instead respect the withdrawal agreement, and be flexible in the talks as well as on deadlines. Both sides should focus on reaching a consensus on trade and other future relations, and not on ending the relationship at any cost.

Meanings of Difficult Words:

- ❖ **post-** (prefix) – after (a particular date, period, or event).
- ❖ **Brexit** (noun) – a term used for the (supposed) departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union.
- ❖ **no-deal Brexit** (noun) – In a no-deal scenario, the UK would immediately leave the European Union (EU) with no withdrawal agreement/divorce deal.
- ❖ **cost** (noun) – loss.
- ❖ **hard-won** (adjective) – relating to something won/acquired with a great deal of effort.
- ❖ **scenario** (noun) – situation.
- ❖ **sword of Damocles** (phrase) – it refers to extremely dangerous situation; a looming threat.
- ❖ **reportedly** (adverb) – supposedly, seemingly, apparently, allegedly.
- ❖ **legislation** (noun) – body of laws, rules, regulations, statutes.
- ❖ **seek** (verb) – try, aim, attempt.
- ❖ **overwrite** (verb) – replace old information/data with new information/data.
- ❖ **protocol** (noun) – procedure, convention, rules of conduct.
- ❖ **Irish backstop/Northern Ireland protocol** (noun) – a position of last resort, to maintain an open border on the island of Ireland in the event that the UK leaves the EU without securing an all-encompassing deal. The Northern Ireland part of the Brexit deal, known as the Protocol, was agreed in October last year and is due to come into effect at the end of this year. It is designed to prevent a hard border in Ireland – or even any new checks at the Irish border. It does this by effectively keeping Northern Ireland in the EU's single market for goods. This will mean products entering Northern Ireland from the rest of the UK will be subject to new checks and control – the so-called Irish Sea border.

- ❖ **hard** (adjective) – hawkish, aggressive, belligerent.
- ❖ **Brexit** (noun) – a person who supports Brexit, the United Kingdom's exit from the European Union.
- ❖ **critical** (adjective) – disapproving, criticizing, fault-finding.
- ❖ **clause** (noun) – term, condition, provision, requirement.
- ❖ **endanger** (verb) – imperil, jeopardize, risk, put in danger.
- ❖ **sovereignty** (noun) – authority, supreme power, domination.
- ❖ **Internal Market** (noun) – also called as “single market”; people, goods, services, and money can move around freely in the single market.
- ❖ **rather than** (phrase) – instead of.
- ❖ **betrayal** (noun) – disloyalty, breach of faith/trust, double-dealing.
- ❖ **cut off** (phrasal verb) – block/stop, remove, discontinue (a standard method of doing/accessing something).
- ❖ **Union customs code (UCC)** (noun) – The Union Customs Code (UCC) is the customs code for the European Union. The (European) Union Customs Code (UCC) defines the legal framework for customs rules and procedures in the EU customs territory, adapted to modern trade models and communication tools.
- ❖ **check** (noun) – control, restraint, curb, restriction/limitation.
- ❖ **Good Friday Accord/Agreement** (noun) – Belfast Agreement; This agreement (signed on 10 April 1998) helped to bring to an end a period of conflict in the region called the Troubles (of Northern Ireland as part of the UK, and the Republic of Ireland as a separate country).
- ❖ **abide by** (verb) – conform to, adhere to, comply with.
- ❖ **Brexit transition period** (noun) – implementation period; The UK left the European Union at 23:00 GMT on 31 January and the UK is now in an 11-month period, known as the transition, that keeps the UK bound to the EU's rules. The transition will end on 31 December 2020. While in transition, the UK remains in both the EU customs union and single market.
- ❖ **transition period** (noun) – a period in which things are changing from one state/condition to another.
- ❖ **kick in** (phrasal verb) – come into effect.
- ❖ **consensus** (noun) – an idea or opinion that is shared by all the people in a group, agreement, concurrence.
- ❖ **aid** (noun) – help, assistance, support.
- ❖ **a level playing field** (phrase) – a situation in which everyone has a fair and equal opportunity to succeed, and no one has an advantage over the other.
- ❖ **break free** (phrase) – escape from.
- ❖ **harden** (verb) – toughen, make tough; stiffen.
- ❖ **drive** (verb) – force, compel/impel; pressurize, urge.
- ❖ **nationalist** (adjective) – patriotic.
- ❖ **ferveur** (noun) – intense feeling, excitement, enthusiasm, passion, spirit.
- ❖ **blind** (adjective) – insensible to, unconcerned about, careless, unthinking, unconsidered, mindless.
- ❖ **consequence** (noun) – result, outcome, effect; ramification, repercussion.
- ❖ **hard line** (noun) – strict & uncompromising policy.
- ❖ **unenviable** (adjective) – difficult, undesirable, unpleasant.
- ❖ **inflict** (verb) – cause, impose, administer, deal out, mete out.
- ❖ **dire** (adjective) – terrible/awful, appalling, distressing.
- ❖ **strait** (noun) – a bad/difficult situation; trouble, crisis.
- ❖ **in dire straits** (phrase) – in a very bad or difficult situation.
- ❖ **besides** (preposition) – in addition to, apart from.
- ❖ **ask (oneself)** (verb) – think about, mull over, ponder.
- ❖ **flexible** (adjective) – adaptable, adjustable, changeable, fluid.
- ❖ **as well as** (phrase) – and in addition; and also.
- ❖ **at any cost** (phrase) – no matter how much effort or money needed.