

Southampton Trial Launches NHS Cancer Vaccine

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A groundbreaking cancer vaccine trial is now underway in Southampton, offering renewed hope to patients across England living with advanced head and neck cancers. The trial, named AHEAD-MERIT (BNT113), is being delivered by the Southampton Clinical Trials Unit and supported by Cancer Research UK as part of the NHS Cancer Vaccine Launch Pad.

Over 100 patients will take part in the trial, which will be rolled out across 15 hospitals over the coming year. The vaccine uses advanced mRNA technology to train the immune system to target two specific proteins found in HPV-related cancers of the mouth, throat, and voice box, aggressive conditions that currently have poor survival rates. Fewer than 50% of the 11,000 annual diagnoses in England live beyond two years.

The first group of patients has already received their vaccinations in the early phase of the trial.

Professor Peter Johnson, NHS England's National Clinical Director for Cancer, described the initiative as "potentially transformative," stating:

"It's fantastic that more patients with advanced head and neck cancers will now be able to access this potentially transformative vaccine, offering renewed hope of holding the disease at bay."

Tamara Kahn, Chief Executive of Oracle Head & Neck Cancer UK, said the programme marked a major advancement in cancer care:

"This offers crucial hope to those living with advanced stages of cancer."

Chris Curtis, 67, from Blackpool, who survived HPV-related head and neck cancer, also welcomed the trial:

"With this aggressive cancer, you live in fear of recurrence every day. Anything that could help control the disease or give people peace of mind is groundbreaking. It'll allow people to get on with their lives and move forward."

This is the third trial launched via the NHS Cancer Vaccine Launch Pad, a partnership between NHS England, BioNTech, and the UK Government aimed at fast-tracking personalised cancer treatments using technology adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Health Minister Karin Smyth praised the trial, calling it a "game-changer" for those with difficult-to-treat cancers:

"By getting these trials running in our NHS, we're putting ourselves at the forefront of medical innovation."

However, while the vaccine trial signals scientific progress, the broader rollout remains in pilot mode. Persistent pressure on NHS core services has led to criticism that the government may be favouring high-profile innovation projects over more practical, long-term health system reforms.

As the AHEAD-MERIT trial continues, both clinicians and patients will closely monitor its results, not only for medical breakthroughs but for signs that such technologies can be realistically delivered through the NHS at scale.