

Participant Webinar 31/3/22 – Frequently Asked Questions

Dear SIREN Study Participants,

Thank you to those of you who attended our Participant Webinar last month. We were pleased to see such engagement with the SIREN study and received lots of excellent questions about the current and future research, COVID-19 testing, serology and vaccines. Please see below for a compilation of the FAQs.

With many thanks for your ongoing participation,

The SIREN Study Team

Is SIREN still running?

Yes! We are delighted that SIREN funding has been approved for another year, so the study is running until at least March 2023. The study is now running in the extension phase, with active follow-up of those participants who opted into follow-up for a second year, at the sites who were able to offer this option locally.

Are there any plans to extend participants beyond the 12-month extension?

The protocol and funding currently cover follow-up to 24 months after your recruitment date. We are pleased to hear that there is interest in continued involvement in SIREN and we will update you should the study period change.

How will changes in SARS-CoV-2 testing accessibility affect SIREN?

We appreciate access to confirmatory PCR testing might be limited as the pandemic evolves. Given this, regular attendance at your SIREN PCR testing is really important. If you continue to have access to Lateral Flow Testing (LFT) please do report these through the NHS app, as we are seeking to bring this data into SIREN. With the reduction in community testing the SIREN study will have a more prominent role in detecting new variants and surveillance, with SIREN data feeding into national decision-making weekly. Please continue to attend your regular SIREN testing in order to support this valuable work.

Can SIREN participants have access to free LFT testing?

As detailed in the most recent government guidance, asymptomatic lateral flow tests will still be available for patient facing staff in the NHS. See [Government sets out next steps for living with COVID-19 - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-sets-out-next-steps-for-living-with-covid-19) for details and contact your local research team or hospital trust.

Does a weak positive test line on a LFT mean less antigen present – i.e., sampling technique related?

A weak positive test demonstrates a lower viral load within the sampling. It may be a true reflection of the amount of virus present in the nasopharynx or could represent poor sampling technique. The lateral flow test is not a quantitative test and should be reported as either positive or negative.

I recently tested positive on one brand of LFT device but negative on another brand of LFT. Why would that be?

There are multiple reasons for discrepancies between lateral flow tests, including sampling technique, consumption of food or drinks before testing, as well as differing sensitivities and specificities of the different LFT brand. If there is any doubt of the true result, one should be treated as positive for the purposes of infection control; please check your local trust policy regarding this. In cases like this, taking a PCR might be useful, where possible, to confirm the results.

Why do some people test positive on PCR but negative on LFT? Is SIREN looking into cases of negative lateral flow tests but positive PCR?

PCR is a far more sensitive method of testing for SARS-CoV-2 than lateral flow testing, with the ability to detect lower levels of virus in the sample. Therefore, the LFT may remain negative despite a positive PCR confirming infection. We are currently looking into monitoring LFTs within SIREN and this could be a topic to be explored in the future.

How do we find out what variant we are infected with?

PCR positive samples obtained via SIREN testing should be sent for sequencing of the virus, thereby potentially identifying the variants. However, not all samples are able to be sequenced, depending on the quality of samples and sequencing results are not always available in real-time. Sequencing results may be available on locally processed PCR positive samples, so please check with your local laboratory to find out whether they are able to provide this to you.

Participants who have an Event of Interest within SIREN may be asked to provide a postal swab for confirmatory PCR and we are developing a reporting pathway for these individuals.

Are antibody titres measured as part of the study?

Serum samples are taken monthly or quarterly within SIREN, which are tested locally for SARS-CoV2 antibodies, and are sent to UKHSA. Results from local antibody testing should be provided to participants as per local procedures. At UKHSA antibody titres are tested for subsets of samples for specific analyses, but not on all samples routinely. Changes in titres over time following infection and or vaccination are a focus of these analyses. We will keep you updated on recent results and publications from the study.

Why are some people more prone to catching COVID-19 than others?

This is a major focus of our ongoing analysis. Key factors involved in individual susceptibility to infection include their immune status, both from vaccination and previous infection; their exposures; the circulating variant and individual genetics.

We know levels of antibodies fall as time goes on, but do we know what the optimum levels of antibodies are?

This is a key outstanding scientific question. How antibody levels correlate with protection against SARS-CoV-2 infection is one of the questions we are investigating as part of SIREN.

Are two doses of vaccine protective against Omicron?

We are currently analysis vaccine effectiveness against Omicron and will be publishing this shortly. There is evidence that three vaccine doses are better than two against Omicron.

Is it ok to receive vaccine doses from different manufacturers?

The data from studies using a mix-and-match vaccination strategy have demonstrated strong protection against disease with no differences in side effects when compared with single vaccine regimens.

Why is there limited data on Moderna in the last SIREN analysis?

Most healthcare workers in the SIREN study received either the Pfizer or AstraZeneca vaccines, as these were licensed first.

Does vaccination or previous COVID-19 infection affect the severity of subsequent episodes of COVID-19?

It is well established that vaccination reduces the likelihood of hospitalisation and severe COVID-19 disease. Severity analysis, to determine the impact of vaccination and previous infection on clinical presentation of COVID-19 in the SIREN cohort, is ongoing. The participant fortnightly questionnaires are crucial to collect these data; please continue to complete them!

Throughout the pandemic I have been exposed to COVID-19 at home and on the wards but have never caught it myself. Is it worth continuing with the study? Are there other studies that would be interested in me?

Yes, please continue in the SIREN study! All the data being collected is valuable as there is wide variability between individuals; thank you for your input so far.

How can I tell if I am eligible for the long COVID study? How can I get involved?

Thank you for your interest in joining this important sub-study. The study is still under development and we will invite eligible participants directly in due course. We will keep all participants updated on progress with this work.

Are you going to research the cell mediated immunity sometime in the future?

SIREN has formed a consortium with other academic groups. Some of these are looking into cell mediated immunity: Protective Immunity from T cells to COVID-19 in Health workers (PITCH) and Vaccine Immunity Breakthrough and Reinfection – Antibodies and T cells (VIBRANT), Humoral Immune Correlates for COVID-19 (HICC).

How can I be part of the SIREN patient and public involvement (PPI) panel?

An expression of interest was shared with participants in December 2021, and recruitment to the current PPI group has now unfortunately closed. Although a small number were selected for this panel, we do hope to have similar opportunities for SIREN participants in the future, so please bear with us and we will keep you informed of any updates! In the meantime if you do have any feedback for us please do contact us via phe.participants@phe.gov.uk