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Half a million Britons join world's most detailed health study

Around one in every 50 people aged 40-69 years in England, Scotland and Wales have been weighed, measured and quizzed about their health and lifestyles for a landmark study that will help to solve the health problems of the 21st century.

UK Biobank has completed its recruitment phase today – with half a million Britons now signed up to the pioneering health research study.

The study includes the most detailed collection of data ever undertaken on eyes and information on diet, fitness, bone density, lung function and grip strength, height, weight, body mass, arterial stiffness, hearing and brain function and family history of common diseases. Participants have donated samples of blood, urine and saliva for long-term storage and analysis, and agreed to have their health followed for 30 years.

The information collected will help scientists to better understand the causes and prevention of a wide range of painful, life-threatening and debilitating common illnesses in mid to later life, including cancer, heart disease, diabetes, dementia, depression, osteoporosis, arthritis, Parkinson's disease and lung and kidney disorders. In particular, it will provide key insights as to why some people develop certain illnesses and others do not.

UK Biobank Principal Investigator Professor Rory Collins said: "This is a landmark achievement. I am enormously grateful to everyone who has gone out of their way to take part in this ambitious study. The resource will be available to the best scientific minds wherever they might be, and I am convinced it will make many major contributions to improving the health of future generations."

The NHS has supported the project. Professor Dame Sally Davies, Director-General, Research and Development, Department of Health, said: “Health research is one of the founding principles of the NHS; it is critical for improved quality of life and more effective healthcare delivery. We already owe a great debt to the many people who have carried out and participated in research over the years.

“I thank the 500,000 who have volunteered for UK Biobank. It will provide researchers with a crucial resource that can deliver public health dividends for years to come by generating a wealth of new knowledge that is relevant to the promotion of good health, the prevention of ill health and the diagnosis and treatment of disease.”

She added: “The UK is a world leader in health research. Through UK Biobank we are building on that tradition to meet the needs of our time and for the sake of future generations.”

Professor Sir John Savill, Chief Scientist for Health for the Scottish Government, one of the funders of the project, said: “I am delighted that from two centres nearly 36,000 Scots have chosen to participate in this ground-breaking study.

“We are very lucky in this country to have such unstinting public support for clinical research. The Chief Scientist Office of the Scottish Government has committed significant funds to the project recognising its importance and the potential long-term benefits for many chronic diseases that pose significant public health problems in Scotland.”

Sir Leszek Borysiewicz, Medical Research Council's Chief Executive, said: “UK Biobank is a one of a kind study. The samples and information given voluntarily by thousands of unsung local heroes across the country will be invaluable to generations of scientists investigating all types of diseases and how to treat them.”

Sir Mark Walport, Director of the Wellcome Trust, added: “Congratulations to the team at UK Biobank but above all congratulations and thanks to all of the participants. The recruitment of 500,000 willing volunteers proves beyond all doubt that there is huge public support for medical research and a willingness and enthusiasm to participate. UK Biobank is a fascinating and exciting project that will generate new knowledge about relationships between health, disease, genes and environment for many years to come.”

Recruitment into UK Biobank began in Manchester in 2007. Since then 20 assessment centres where people have been able to join the project have opened.

Health scientists with the appropriate ethics and scientific approvals will be able to use the resource to help with their studies. They will have to put their findings back in to the public domain for other scientists to use for the public good.

The £66 million UK Biobank project is hosted by Manchester University and funded by the Wellcome Trust charity, Medical Research Council, Department of Health, Scottish Government, Welsh Assembly Government, Northwest Regional Development Agency and the British Heart Foundation.

The resource is backed by the NHS, health scientists, universities and other medical charities such as Cancer Research UK, Arthritis Research Campaign, Diabetes UK and the British Lung Foundation.

Professor Bill Ollier, from The University of Manchester, said: “The University is proud to be part of this landmark scientific infrastructure project and looks forward to the major health discoveries and benefits that will undoubtedly now accrue as the study moves into its analysis phase. The altruistic contribution of so many people in the UK is wonderful and they should be recognised as being true Citizen Scientists.”

Only information that does not identify participants will be provided to scientists. An independent UK Biobank Ethics & Governance Council has independent oversight of the project on behalf of participants and the general public.

www.ukbiobank.ac.uk

Ends.

Contact

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Note to Editors:

1. Assessment centres and numbers of participants recruited
 - a. Leeds 44,264
 - b. Bristol 43,052
 - c. Newcastle 37,046
 - d. Nottingham 33,923
 - e. Liverpool 32,870
 - f. Reading 29,451
 - g. Hounslow 28,602
 - h. Manchester Bury 28,413
 - i. Sheffield 28,030
 - j. Croydon 25,260
 - k. Birmingham 21,504
 - l. Middlesbrough 21,317
 - m. Stoke 19,456
 - n. Glasgow 18,678
 - o. Cardiff 17,900
 - p. Edinburgh 17,213
 - q. Oxford 14,075
 - r. Manchester 13,963
 - s. North & central London 12,605
 - t. Swansea mobile unit 2,291
 - u. Wrexham mobile unit (August 2010)

2. For almost 100 years the Medical Research Council has improved the health of people in the UK and around the world by supporting the highest quality science. The MRC invests in world-class scientists. It has produced 29 Nobel Prize winners and sustains a flourishing environment for internationally recognised research. The MRC

focuses on making an impact and provides the financial muscle and scientific expertise behind medical breakthroughs, including one of the first antibiotics penicillin, the structure of DNA and the lethal link between smoking and cancer. Today MRC funded scientists tackle research into the major health challenges of the 21st century.

www.mrc.ac.uk

3. [The Wellcome Trust](#) is a global charity dedicated to achieving extraordinary improvements in human and animal health. It supports the brightest minds in biomedical research and the medical humanities. The Trust's breadth of support includes public engagement, education and the application of research to improve health. It is independent of both political and commercial interests.