
COVID-19 Contact Tracing: Apps vs. Manual Work



A milestone contact tracing software has been released by Apple-Google, but the future of its adoption is yet unclear, with some countries instead relying on manual collection of COVID-19 data.

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This week Apple and Google [have released](#) the 'Exposure Notification' software, which represents a milestone in the development of a new generation of iOS and Android public health apps. This follows the [late April release](#) of a beta version of the contact tracing technology.

The software, rolled out as part of iOS and Android system update, is expected to be incorporated in contact tracing apps built by public health authorities. It alerts users when they apparently came into contact with people who tested positive for the COVID-19 infection.

Several countries (eg, Germany and Switzerland) and some U.S. states, including South Carolina, North Dakota and Alabama, have already said they will adopt the Apple/Google offering. (Notably, the official COVID-19 contact-tracing app for the state of North Dakota, called [Care19](#), has already been found to have privacy issues, according to [a report](#) from Jumbo Privacy.) At the same time, several states [do not plan](#) to incorporate the Apple-Google tool into their apps or contact tracing plans.

The joint Apple-Google plan to develop the technology was [announced](#) in April. According to the announcement, in May APIs would be released to "enable interoperability between Android and iOS devices using apps from public health authorities." In the coming months the two tech giants would work "to enable a broader Bluetooth-based contact tracing platform by building this functionality into the underlying platforms." This solution would allow for the inclusion of more individuals, more apps and government health authorities into the ecosystem, the Apple-Google joint statement said. It is also noted that "user adoption is key to success," since the technology is opt-in for both use and infection reporting and does not collect or use location from the device.

In the meantime, the UK, which has chosen a different approach to contact tracing (a centralised nation-wide app as opposed to non-centralised Apple-Google system) is struggling with broader adoption of the app, which is now being piloted in the Isle of Wight. The app was first said to be rolled out in mid-May, but according to Health Secretary Matt Hancock [will not be available](#) until June. Experts have identified [a number of issues](#) with the app and called the government to switch to non-centralised model (it has been reported that a [second contact-tracing app](#) is being developed, using Apple and Google's technology).

A [non-representative survey](#) conducted by City, University of London, has found a slightly higher level of support for the centralised app model, with 58% of participants likely to download the app if data was uploaded to a remote government server, while if data stays on a user's phone with no central oversight of the virus spread, the proportion is around 48% of respondents.

However, the app will only play a supplementary role to manual contact tracing in the U.K. The government instead will rely on [25,000 contact tracers](#) to manually track 10,000 new cases a day. Similarly, in the U.S. state public health departments are hiring thousands of contact tracers, and experts are calling for more than 100,000 workers to be deployed, ProPublica [reports](#), noting that "contact tracing, ultimately, depends on the goodwill of a population."

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