

Tim Spector: the data explorer who uncovered vital clues to Covid

The epidemiologist on tracking the virus's symptoms, how diet affects disease — and what he plans next

Madhumita Murgia JULY 31 2021

Be the first to know about every new Coronavirus story

Get instant email alerts

When Tim Spector tells me that I probably had Covid-19 last March when I was days away from having a baby, it's hard to ignore him. That's because Spector is the man who informed the nation about the most predictive (and strange) symptom of Covid-19 last year: the [loss of smell and taste](#).

He breaks the rather alarming news to me with such affability that I forget to retroactively panic. "Maybe your pregnancy protected you from having very extreme symptoms because your immune system would have been working well already," he says, reassuringly.

Nevertheless, he is confident because, as he explains, losing my sense of smell and taste as I did during the first wave of the pandemic was a textbook symptom at the time and 90 per cent predictive of a positive Covid-19 test.

Spector knows this because he is the epidemiologist behind the [Covid Symptom Study app](#), a reporting tool that is arguably the world's largest ever citizen science experiment. The software, which was designed and launched in five days at the start of the pandemic in April 2020, was masterminded by a handful of doctors and scientists at King's College London as well as the health science company Zoe, which Spector co-founded. (Many people call it the Zoe app because the start-up's logo briefly appears on the software's home screen.)

A week after the app was released, a million people had downloaded it, spurred on by a tweet from Stephen Fry. By the second week, that number had doubled. More than a year on, 4.6 million Britons have logged their symptoms. About a quarter continue to diligently self-report their health via the app every day.