



COVID-19 advice sheet for Paediatric Rheumatology Patients at Starship Children's Hospital (23 March 2020)

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 (COroNaVirus Disease 19) is a new illness that can affect your lungs and airways. It's caused by a virus called coronavirus. The current outbreak of COVID-19 started in China, but cases have now been reported in many countries worldwide including New Zealand. The time to first symptoms is up to 14 days.

What are the symptoms of COVID-19?

The main symptoms of COVID-19 are-

- a cough or sore throat
- a high temperature (at least 38°C)
- shortness of breath

Less common symptoms are aches and pains, nasal congestion, runny nose or diarrhoea. Most people experience mild to moderate symptoms. The symptoms are similar to other viral illnesses that are much more common, such as cold and 'flu.

How does COVID-19 spread?

COVID-19, like the 'flu, can be spread from person to person. When a person who is infected coughs, sneezes or talks, they may spread droplets containing the virus a short distance, which quickly settle on surrounding surfaces. People may become infected directly by droplets contacting their eyes, nose or mouth, or by touching contaminated surfaces then touching their eyes, nose or mouth without washing their hands.

Who is immunocompromised?

If a person is taking medication that affects their immunity we recommend they follow the advice for immunocompromised people.

Medications that affect the immune system are those like methotrexate, biologics (etanercept (enbrel), adalimumab (humira), infliximab (remicade), tocilizumab (actemra), rituximab (mabthera), leflunomide (arava), sulphasalazine, azathioprine (imuran), mycophenolate mofetil (cellcept), cyclophosphamide, or steroids (prednisolone, prednisone).

Am I at more risk for infection in view of my immunocompromised state?

People who are older (particularly over 70) and those with underlying health conditions, such as chronic lung disease, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic kidney disease, and cancer appear to be at higher risk for major complications. That includes admission to intensive care (ICU) and even death. Early data from small studies of severe cases seen in China did not include many people taking immune suppressing medication. There is no specific data regarding COVID 19 and immunocompromised children.



Should I still come to clinic appointments?

Non urgent clinic appointments are being converted to virtual consultations.

If you are asked to attend clinic for a review there is no need to cancel clinic appointments unless you are unwell with symptoms such as fever, cough, sore throat, runny nose or shortness of breath. If you are unwell on the day of your clinic please call to cancel and do not attend. We are investigating other ways to conduct clinics without face to face contact (virtual clinics).

If you have come into contact with anyone who has been diagnosed with COVID-19 please DO NOT attend your outpatient appointment. Please ring the Rheumatology team to discuss the situation.

We are screening patients as they come into clinic and those who are unwell are being seen separately and advised to wear a mask.

If possible, come to clinic appointments with one family member.

Do I need to stockpile my medications?

No, at this stage we are not anticipating shortages of prescription medications so there is no need to get a larger supply than usual. Ensure you have at least one month's supply.

What can I do to protect myself and others against COVID-19?

- Cough or sneeze into your elbow or by covering your mouth and nose with tissues.
- Wash hands for at least 20 seconds with water and soap and dry them thoroughly before eating or handling food, after using the toilet, and after coughing or sneezing
- Don't touch your eyes, nose or mouth if your hands are not clean
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces and objects, such as doorknobs.
- Ensure you get the influenza vaccine when it is available
- Eat, sleep and exercise well. There are no particular supplements we would recommend.
- Avoid contact with people who are unwell. If you are unable to stay away from sick people in your house, use social distancing - in particular stay more than two metres away from them and sleep in a different room
- Avoid people who have travelled overseas in the last 14 days and who might be infected with COVID19

Will masks help prevent me getting infected?

At this stage, there is no need to wear a mask when in public. However, if your healthcare provider advises you to wear a mask when in public areas because you have a particularly vulnerable immune system, follow that advice.

Should I still go to work or school?

Follow MOH guidelines depending on alert level – currently level 2.

Those 70 and over and who are immunocompromised are advised to stay at home.



Consider alternatives to spending time with crowds or large groups of people close together (e.g. shopping, movies, concerts, religious and other meetings). You don't need to be a hermit, just avoid situations where you will be in close contact (less than two metres) with others.

What should I do if I develop possible symptoms of COVID-19 or think that I might be infected?

If you have concerns about COVID-19 exposure because you have travelled or had contact with a confirmed or suspected case, or have mild cold/flu symptoms, stay home and call **Healthline on 0800 358 5453**.

If more significant symptoms occur, such as fever, cough, or difficulty breathing, contact your GP urgently and inform them of your symptoms. **Call ahead before attending** to avoid exposing staff and other patients to possible infection.

If you experience a **medical emergency call 111** for an ambulance and tell the operator if you are worried it might be related to COVID-19.

You should inform the treating health care service of your rheumatology condition so that they can discuss your medications with your Rheumatology team.

Should I change the doses of my immunosuppression because of concerns about COVID-19?

In the case of fever and suspected infection, seek advice from your GP and/or specialist, and stop taking the biologic until the fever has resolved. This is the standard advice for patients on biologics who develop any infection. Pause medication like methotrexate and contact the Rheumatology team.

If you are taking steroids (e.g. prednisone/prednisolone), consult your specialist regarding possible dose adjustment. Steroids should not be abruptly stopped.

If in self-isolation, without symptoms, usual medication should be continued.

Usual doses of medications should be continued because the harm associated with dose reduction or stopping without specialist consultation is significant.

Should I have the flu and pneumonia vaccinations?

We strongly recommend the flu vaccination for everyone when it becomes available in April, contact your local pharmacy or General Practitioner.

What are the current travel recommendations for immunocompromised travellers?

Currently immunocompromised travellers should avoid unnecessary travel.

If essential travel cannot be avoided for example, when there is family illness or bereavement, precautions should be taken to reduce your risk of infection. Ensure you have adequate travel insurance – many insurers will no longer cover costs related to COVID-19. If symptoms occur, such as fever, cough, or difficulty breathing, travellers are advised to contact local health care providers, preferably by phone.



People may be quarantined or asked to self-isolate for 14 days on their entry to another country or return to NZ. We advise checking for up to date information prior to departure.

In summary

Avoid crowded places and unnecessary travel

Practise strict hygiene

- wash your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds
- avoid touching eyes, nose and mouth,
- cough or sneeze into your elbow or a disposable tissue,
- disinfect surfaces regularly

Don't stop medication unless unwell with fever and/or this has been discussed with a specialist

Use your 'elbow bump' - avoid hugging and hand shakes

Call ahead if you have cold/flu symptoms or have had contact with potential Covid19 case

Keep up to date with reliable sources

- Health info www.healthinfo.org.nz
- Ministry of Health <https://www.health.govt.nz/our-work/diseases-and-conditions/covid-19-novel-coronavirus>
- New Zealand Rheumatology Association (NZRA) <https://www.rheumatology.org.nz/>
- Paediatric Rheumatology European Association (PRES) <https://www.pres.eu/news/newsstory.html?id=29>
- New Zealand Safe Travel www.safetravel.govt.nz
- World Health Organisation www.who.int
- Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) www.cdc.gov