

Some questions and answers about COVID-19 (coronavirus, newly named SARS-CoV-2).

We know that a lot of the information about COVID-19 for the general public does not answer the concerns of people who have reduced immunity because of a medical condition or treatment. This document attempts to answer some common questions from our patients. It also includes some information about changes to our routines at the Royal Sussex County Hospital (Brighton) and the Princess Royal Hoispital (Haywards Heath).

We want to reassure you that we are doing all we can to ensure that we can continue your care and treatment safely. If you have specific questions about your treatment or hospital appointments please get in touch with your Clinical nurse specialist or Service Co-ordinator on the telephone numbers that you have previously been provided.

Questions about risks for people with reduced immunity:

1. How great is the risk for those on treatment?

People who are having treatment that reduces immunity are at greater risk of difficulties than the general population if they contract COVID-19. The virus affects the respiratory system, so the main risks are lung infection.

We do not know what proportion of people on treatment will contract the virus. We do not know what proportion who do contract the virus will become severely ill. We have not had enough time to observe and understand the precise risks of COVID-19 for people having treatment.

If you are having chemotherapy, are taking immune system-suppressing drugs or if your immune system is suppressed for other reasons, you will know how to protect yourself from infection. You should follow the instructions given to you by your medical team.

2. Is there any advice for people who are in remission? How great is the risk for people who are well but still immunocompromised?

People who have recently completed treatment that reduces immunity, or people who have long term reduced immunity, are at greater risk of complications than the general population if they contract COVID-19. The virus affects the respiratory system, so the main risks are lung infection.

We do not know what proportion of people with reduced immunity will contract the virus. We do not know what proportion who do contract the virus will become severely ill. We have not had enough time to observe and understand the precise risks of COVID-19 for people with reduced immunity.

People with reduced immunity should reduce their risks of exposure.

→ For more information about reducing exposure, see the Government and NHS sites listed at the end of this document.

3. Will my treatment be delayed? If I have treatment planned for the future, should this be delayed?

We will continue the treatment of your existing condition as far as possible. Although COVID-19 is an added risk, we must also consider the risk of your existing illness, and we will do our best to take care of you safely.

In some cases, treatment that is not urgent might be delayed. This decision will only be taken if it is safe to do so. You will be contacted by your medical team if there is any proposal to change your treatment schedule. You will have the opportunity to talk to a member of your medical team about this so that you can decide together about the risks and benefits of treatment.

You should continue to take your prescribed medications unless you are advised not to by your medical team.

4. Are there any special actions or contingency plans being made for people who have reduced immunity?

There are no treatments or vaccines for COVID-19 and so we cannot offer treatments to prevent people from getting it. What we can do is reduce the risk of spreading it.

Like the common cold, COVID-19 infection usually occurs through close contact with a person with the virus, via cough, sneezes or hand contact. Washing your hands reduces the risk of contamination from surfaces.

The main action we can take is to reduce your risk of exposure.

BSUH NHS Trust managers have agreed measures to protect patients who are using the hospital services. We are seeking to reduce visitors to the hospital wards, outpatients and Day Treatment Unit. As far as possible, only patients will be permitted to these areas. People will be asked questions about their risk of exposure before they are permitted to enter these areas.

We are looking at the patient lists for our clinics to see if there are people who can have a telephone consultation with a medical professional, instead of coming to clinic. You will be notified if there are any changes to your hospital appointments.

We are considering changes to blood test arrangements to allow us to take blood without people coming into the Hospital and we are working with the local GPs to ensure that these services continue. We will be in touch if there are any problems in accessing local blood taking services to make alternative arrangements for you.

→ For more information about reducing exposure, see the Government and NHS sites listed at the end of this document.

5. Should I still ring the treatment helpline if I have a temperature of 37.5 or will the threshold be lowered?

Yes. You should continue to follow the same instructions as you would normally about contacting the treatment helpline if you are worried about your health. Our treatment nurses will ask you extra questions about your risk of exposure to COVID-19.

6. Will there be plans to admit more people with weak immune systems to hospital to prevent them catching the virus?

No, there are no plans to admit people to hospital unless they need to be in hospital.

It is safer for people with reduced immunity to avoid hospitals and GP surgeries as far as possible.

7. If access to hospital is reduced, will I still be able to get my essential medication from Pharm@Sea pharmacy?

Yes, you will still be able to get your medication. We might suggest that a friend or member of your family collect your prescription for you.

We are exploring ways to help people get their medications without having to wait at the hospital, for example arranging telephone assessments prior to posting your medications to you. We will provide further information about pharmacy to inform you of any changes to this service.

Questions about protecting myself:

1. Should people with reduced immunity be taking antivirals to protect against COVID-19?

No. There is no evidence to suggest that antiviral medications prevent or treat COVID-19.

COVID-19 is a different virus to the flu. The flu vaccine and anti-flu drugs do not work for COVID-19.

2. How soon is a vaccine likely to be developed? Will this be a live vaccine?

Scientists are working on a vaccine for COVID-19. However, it will be many months before this is available.

3. I have heard that people with COVID-19 can get pneumonia. Does this mean my usual pneumonia vaccine will help?

No. Regular pneumonia vaccines protect against bacterial pneumonia. COVID-19 is a virus, so the normal pneumonia vaccine won't work.

→ For more information about reducing exposure, see the Government and NHS sites listed at the end of this document.

4. Should I avoid public transport and crowded events or places?

Yes the current Government advice for self isolation and social distancing vulnerable cancer patients may be accessed via the following link:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19>

5. If I am having chemotherapy, or other drug treatments like immunotherapy should I stay home as far as possible?

Yes the current Government advice for self isolation and social distancing vulnerable cancer patients may be accessed via the following link:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19>

6. Should I be wearing a face mask?

In line with the current government guidance, all visitors and staff in the hospital must wear a face covering. We'll provide you with a mask if you don't have one.

7. I can't find any hand gel in the shops. What can I do?

Don't worry if you can't buy hand gel.

Washing your hands properly will help protect you from transmitting the virus. This is more effective than hand gel. You will find more information about hand washing in the link at the end of this document.

If you can find hand gel make sure it is at least 60% alcohol.

8. What do I do if I realise that I've been in contact with someone who has or may have the virus?

If you think you might have been exposed to the virus, you should follow the same instructions as those for the general public. Make sure you tell the

person you speak to about your condition and treatment. You will find a link to the Government and NHS sites at the end of this document.

After you have followed these steps, please also notify your usual clinical team.

→ For more information about reducing exposure, see the Government and NHS sites listed at the end of this document.

9. Should I avoid contact with anyone who has recently returned from one of the affected areas of the world?

Yes. You should be aware of the risks of those close to you, including family, friends and work colleagues. Take steps to limit contact with anyone who has been to one of the badly affected countries. The list of countries is available using the Government link at the end of this website. Ask the people you know to be aware of your reduced immunity to ensure that they do what they can to take care of themselves – and you.

However, we know that the virus is now being transmitted within the UK, and people who have it might have no known connection to people who have returned from overseas. For this reason, you should take steps to limit your exposure using the guidance offered here, and on the Government and NHS websites listed at the end of this document.

Other sources of information:

For the latest Government guidance:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/coronavirus-covid-19-uk-government-response>

For the latest NHS information:

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>

For information on how to reduce your risk of exposure:

<https://publichealthmatters.blog.gov.uk/2020/03/04/coronavirus-covid-19-5-things-you-can-do-to-protect-yourself-and-your-community/>

For information on effective handwashing:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/health-51754472/coronavirus-how-to-wash-your-hands-in-20-seconds>

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/health-51722269/coronavirus-how-do-i-protect-myself>

The following BBC programme contains useful information and answers to common questions:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/m000gjch/bbc-news-special-coronavirus-explained>