



COVID-19 advice sheet for immunocompromised patients

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is a viral illness that can affect your lungs and other organ systems. It's caused by a type of coronavirus. The infection is established in most countries worldwide, including New Zealand and we are learning more about it every day.

What are the symptoms of COVID-19?

The symptoms of COVID-19 are:

- a cough or sore throat
- a high temperature (at least 38°C)
- shortness of breath
- sneezing and runny nose
- temporary loss of smell and/or taste

Most people experience mild to moderate symptoms and some have no symptoms at all. 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 the virus a short distance through vapour and droplets containing the virus, 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. Contact between people needs to be limited to prevent intensive transmission and widespread outbreaks.

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 and liver disease, severe obesity and cancer appear to be at higher risk for major complications.

Should I still come to clinic appointments?

We are planning to change clinics to virtual, Zoom or telephone appointments where possible.

If you do need to be seen in person, we still have the ability to see people in clinic and we would encourage you to attend. Please call ahead if you are unwell as we may then do the review by phone. We are screening patients as they arrive at the clinic and those who are unwell are being seen separately. All patients and visitors are advised to wear a mask. Masks will be available at the entrance to our hospitals for those who do not have one. If possible, come to clinic appointments by yourself or just bring one family member.

Do I need to stockpile my medications?

No, there is no need to get a larger supply of medication than usual.

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

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

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.
- Avoid contact with people who are unwell. If you are unable to stay away from sick people in your house, use physical distancing - in particular stay more than 2 metres away from them and sleep in a different room.
- Don't touch your eyes, nose or mouth if your hands are not clean.
- Wear a mask when you are out in public spaces.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces and objects, such as doorknobs.
- Ensure you get the season influenza vaccine when it is available.
- Eat, sleep and exercise well.

Masks, distancing and hand washing.

We should all wear masks when in public spaces. Wearing a face mask can reduce the risk of people who have COVID-19 spreading the virus to others. This is important as we understand some people with COVID-19 may have no symptoms. The best thing to do is to stay at least 2 metres away from other people and wash your hands frequently.

Should I still go to work or school?

No, unless you work for an essential service. If you work for an essential service and are still uncertain, contact your employer for advice specific to your situation. If you are going to work, you should physically distance where possible and wear a mask when this is not possible.

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 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 and inform them of your symptoms. Phone your GP 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.

What if I am sick for another reason?

If you are sick for another reason then it is really important to seek advice from a health professional. Call Healthline or your GP if you have any concerns. The biggest danger currently is people not coming to hospital and becoming critically unwell as they have stayed at home. The hospital is open and staffed to see you.

What are the current travel recommendations for immunocompromised travellers?

All New Zealanders are advised against non-essential travel. It is advisable to stay at home and local. Do not self-isolate at holiday houses. If people in these places do become unwell, there is a risk smaller hospitals with limited resources may be overwhelmed.

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