

## COVID-19 advice sheet for immunocompromised patients (24 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 cases in NZ have mainly occurred in people who have travelled to countries with significant COVID-19 outbreaks, or who live in the same house as those who have travelled. Note that there are some cases that we can't link to travel. New Zealand is therefore about to move to Level 4 of the COVID-19 Alert system. For more detail on this see the official COVID-19 website.

### 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

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. 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 disease, and cancer appear to be at higher risk for major complications. That includes admission to intensive care (ICU) and even death. However, this is based on early data from small studies and more information continues to emerge.

### Should I still come to clinic appointments?

At this stage, we are planning to change to all clinics being virtual or phone appointments. This is a work in progress.

You will be contacted about this as the process steps up. In some instances, patients will need to be seen in person. Please do not come to clinic unless you are advised to do that. 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 by yourself- or just bring 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.

### **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 social distancing- in particular stay more than one metre away from them and sleep in a different room
- 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

### **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?**

No, unless you work for an essential service. As of midnight 25/03/2020 everyone else should stay at home. If you work for an essential service and are still uncertain, contact your employer for advice specific to your situation.

### **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.

### **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 are the current travel recommendations for immunocompromised travelers?**

All New Zealanders are advised against non-essential travel. It is advisable to stay at home and 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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**FINAL** Revision version 3 (24 March 2020) **APPROVED:** Alex Pimm Auckland DHB IMT Controller 24/03/2020. **Author:** Ian Dittmer, Renal Physician. **Consultation:** Auckland DHB Clinical TAG.