Coronavirus (COVID-19) – Important advice for people with rheumatic conditions

This leaflet provides you and your family with information about how Coronavirus (COVID-19) might affect you if you have a rheumatic condition.

The most common symptoms of COVID-19 are a new continuous cough and/or a fever/high temperature (37.8°C or greater).

A new continuous cough is where you:
- have a new cough that’s lasted for an hour
- have had 3 or more episodes of coughing in 24 hours
- are coughing more than usual

A high temperature is feeling hot to the touch on your chest or back (you don’t need to measure your temperature). You may feel warm, cold or shivery.

Some people will have more serious symptoms, including pneumonia or difficulty breathing, which might require admission to hospital.

Your safety is our priority and we aim to minimise disruption to hospital services where possible. The NHS will continue to provide vital cancer treatments, and emergency and urgent care for all patients. With that in mind we have listed some important information below. This advice includes answers to questions you may have and details on services that can offer advice and support.

Some groups of people are considered to be at extremely high risk of severe illness with COVID-19. If you are in this group you will receive a letter from NHS Scotland or be contacted by your doctor and should follow shielding measures: https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/infections-and-poisoning/coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-covid-19-shielding.
What should I know about Coronavirus (COVID-19) and rheumatic conditions?

It is possible that some people with some rheumatic conditions disease may have a higher risk of becoming severely ill if they have Coronavirus/COVID-19 because they are on drugs that suppress their immune system. If this applies to you, you will be contacted directly by the NHS with advice that you should stay at home at all times and avoid all face-to-face contact until told otherwise. It is possible this advice will change as more information is available and, if so, you will be contacted again.

Where can I get support?

If you have concerns about your condition or your treatment you should contact your rheumatology team.


For general information and any concerns about Coronavirus / COVID-19 you can call 0800 028 2816 (COVID-19 helpline).


Further information about COVID-19 for children or young people with rheumatic conditions is available at the Scottish Paediatric and Adolescent Rheumatology Network (SPARN) [https://www.sparn.scot.nhs.uk/](https://www.sparn.scot.nhs.uk/).

There is also further advice available on Parent Club on how to support your child at this difficult time. [https://www.parentclub.scot/topics/health/coronavirus](https://www.parentclub.scot/topics/health/coronavirus).

For other non-emergency health concerns, your first point of contact should still be your GP or 111. They are likely to assess you over the telephone or via video link rather than in person to reduce the risk of infection from COVID-19.

You should ask family, friends and neighbours to support you and use online services to arrange deliveries of food and medicines where possible if you are not able or advised not to leave your home.

If this is not possible, then arrangements have been made for:

- **those classed in the highest risk group** to register for support via a text service, details will be sent to you in a letter from NHS Scotland advising you to shield yourself at home (you are in this group if you have a qualifying health condition and/or are prescribed immune-suppressant therapies) [https://www.gov.scot/publications/covid-shielding-contacts/pages/highest-risk-classification/](https://www.gov.scot/publications/covid-shielding-contacts/pages/highest-risk-classification/) or
• **those classed at increased risk** to telephone a national assistance helpline 0800 111 4000 Monday to Friday during office hours (you are eligible for this if you are over 70 or receive the flu vaccine for medical reasons). Further information is also available at [https://www.readyscotland.org/coronavirus/where-to-find-additional-support/](https://www.readyscotland.org/coronavirus/where-to-find-additional-support/).

Please remember this helpline is dedicated to helping those who cannot leave their home and who cannot get help online. If you receive support from health and social care organisations, such as care support through your local authority, this will continue as normal.

**What is the risk to me if I have a rheumatic condition?**

It is not known if having rheumatoid arthritis, psoriatic arthritis, ankylosing spondylitis, SLE, Sjogren's syndrome, connective tissue disease or vasculitis increase the risk of contracting Covid-19 in themselves. However it is possible that the risk of developing severe illness may be increased in people receiving certain drug treatments that suppress the immune system (immunosuppressives).

This does not apply to all drugs but you may be at higher risk of severe illness from Coronavirus/COVID-19 if you are on steroid medication (prednisolone) and/or other immunosuppressant medication. It is difficult to provide a precise estimate of how much these drugs increase the risk for individual patients.

The following has been informed by guidance produced by the British Society for Rheumatology and provides practical guidance on whether you might be in the highest risk group or not. The risk to an individual will also take account of other factors such as age and other health conditions.

1) **Highest Risk**: If your medication includes steroids (prednisolone typically >20mg daily or less in combination with other drugs), cyclophosphamide, or combinations of immunosuppressive drugs and biologic medications and you also have heart disease, lung disease, kidney disease, diabetes or are aged over 70 years.

2) **Increased Risk**: If your disease is well controlled with biologic or immunosuppressive therapy but you are not on steroids, you are on no more than 2 immunosuppressive drugs, you are under 70 years of age and you do not have any additional health problems.

3) **Low or Normal Risk**: You are at low risk if your disease is well controlled and you are on no long term medication, or taking only Sulfasalazine or Hydroxychloroquine.

Identification of people at the highest risk is ongoing, informed by centrally held data and with input from GPs and hospital clinicians. If you have questions about this please contact your hospital rheumatology team and not your GP.

I am part of the group who are identified as at highest risk of illness and got a letter from the NHS. Is there something I need to do differently to reduce the risk of Coronavirus?

The safest course of action is for you to stay at home at all times and avoid all face-to-face contact for at least twelve weeks, except from carers and healthcare workers who you must see as part of your medical care. The rest of your household should support you to stay safe and closely follow guidance on physical distancing, reducing their contact inside and outside the home. This will help protect you by stopping you from coming into contact with the virus.

**Things you or the person you care for should be doing and not doing to stay safe.**

- **DO STRICTLY AVOID** contact with anyone who is displaying symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19). These symptoms include high temperature (above 37.8 °C) and/or a new and continuous cough. You might want to have a thermometer at home to check your temperature if you are worried that you may have a fever.

- **DON’T** leave your home.

- **DON’T** attend any gatherings. This includes gatherings of friends and families in private spaces e.g. family homes, weddings and religious services.

- **DON’T** go out for shopping, leisure or travel. When arranging food or medication deliveries, these should be left at the door to minimise contact.

- **DO** keep in touch using remote technology such as phone, internet, and social media.

- **DO** use telephone or online services to contact your GP (for non-coronavirus issues) or other essential services.

- **DO** regularly wash your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds. Ask carers or support workers who visit your home to do the same.

The rest of your household need to support you to stay safe and must stringently follow guidance on physical distancing, reducing physical contact with other people outside the home. Advice about face coverings is available at: [https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-public-use-of-face-coverings/](https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-public-use-of-face-coverings/)

In your home, you should:

- minimise the time you spend with others in shared spaces (kitchen, bathroom and sitting areas) and keep any shared spaces well ventilated
- aim to keep 2 metres away from others and encourage them to sleep in a different bed where possible
• use separate towels and, if possible, use a separate bathroom from the rest of the household, or clean the bathroom with cleaning products after every use
• avoid using the kitchen when others are present, take your meals back to your room to eat where possible, and ensure all kitchenware is cleaned thoroughly using a dishwasher at the 60 degrees setting if possible, otherwise in very warm soapy water.

If the rest of your household are able to follow this guidance to help keep you safe, there is no need for them to wear any special medical clothing or equipment.

I did not receive a letter from the NHS, but I am currently being treated for a rheumatic condition, do I need to do anything differently to reduce the risk of Coronavirus?

If you have not received a letter from NHS Scotland but using this guidance believe your condition or circumstance falls within the highest risk group you should protect yourself immediately by following the shielding measures set out on the NHS Inform website.


If you have not received a letter and do not believe your condition or circumstance is in the highest risk group, you do not need to follow shielding measures.

If you meet the criteria set out in this guidance for increased or normal risk, then you should follow physical distancing measures:


If you are not following shielding measures and develop symptoms of Coronavirus/Covid-19 your household should follow the instructions to self-isolate:


Will my treatment change?

Your treatment plan is individual to you. You should not change your medication unless told to by your GP or rheumatologist. If you develop symptoms of any infection, seek advice from your rheumatology team, as they may advise you to alter your medication. If you are on steroid medication (prednisolone) you should not stop that suddenly.

Should I still go to hospital appointments?

Yes. You should keep your appointments but in most cases these will be carried out by telephone unless your consultant thinks it is necessary to be seen in person.
If you have symptoms of possible Coronavirus/COVID-19 infection then do not come to the hospital. Instead you should check your symptoms against the information on NHS Inform [https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/infections-and-poisoning/coronavirus-covid-19](https://www.nhsinform.scot/illnesses-and-conditions/infections-and-poisoning/coronavirus-covid-19) and call 111 to seek further advice.

Please tell the call handler about your rheumatic condition. Please also inform your rheumatology team.

If hospital admission is likely please remember to pack your mobile phone and phone charger so you can keep in touch with relatives and friends.

**Will the symptoms be different because I have a rheumatic condition and what should I look out for?**

The symptoms of Coronavirus are likely to be the same as the general population.


We recommend everyone follows the NHS and Government advice about what to do if they are concerned they have come into contact with someone with coronavirus.

**Who should I contact if I become unwell or develop side effects while on my current medicines?**

If you have chest pain, significant bleeding or you need immediate medical attention call 999.

If you have symptoms of Coronavirus/ COVID-19 while you are on immunosuppressive therapy, or for any side effects of drug treatment, call 111. They will ask a series of questions and will give advice or arrange for you to have a medical review at your nearest hospital. You should mention all your medication, including any treatment that is given by injection or infusion.

All people, including those aged 16 years and under, should continue to take their medication unless directed otherwise by their rheumatology team or GP. If you are planning to start or switch to a new medication this may now need to be reviewed. Please remember if you are taking steroids (prednisolone) you should not stop these suddenly.

If you think you may have Coronavirus/COVID-19, developed a new continuous cough and/or a fever/high temperature do not go to your GP, pharmacy or hospital. You should phone 111 if:

- your symptoms worsen,
- breathlessness develops or worsens,
- your symptoms haven’t improved in 7 days
Tell the call handler about your rheumatic condition.

If you have a medical emergency, phone 999 and tell them if you have Coronavirus/COVID-19 symptoms.

What should I do to collect my routine medications?

You should ask family, friends and neighbours to support you and use online services to arrange deliveries of food and medicines where possible if you are not able or advised not to leave your home.

If this is not possible, then arrangements have been made for:

• **those classed in the highest risk group** to register for support via a text service, details will be sent to you in a letter from NHS Scotland advising you to shield yourself at home (you are in this group if you have a qualifying health condition and/or are prescribed immune-suppressant therapies)


• **those classed at increased risk** to telephone a national assistance helpline 0800 111 4000 Monday to Friday during office hours (you are eligible for this if you are over 70 or receive the flu vaccine for medical reasons). Further information is also available at https://www.readyscotland.org/coronavirus/where-to-find-additional-support/.

Please remember this helpline is dedicated to helping those who cannot leave their home and who cannot get help online. If you receive support from health and social care organisations, such as care support through your local authority, this will continue as normal.

What should I do if I am a carer for someone with a rheumatic condition?

Coronavirus/COVID-19 can have serious effects on anyone who has a long-term health condition or a weakened immune system, including some people with a rheumatic condition.

If you’re caring for someone who’s vulnerable, there are some simple steps that you can take to protect them. You should follow advice on good hygiene, such as:

• Wash your hands on arrival and often - use soap and water for at least 20 seconds or use hand sanitiser

• Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve (not your hands) when you cough or sneeze

• Put used tissues in the bin immediately and wash your hands

• Don’t visit if you’re unwell and make alternative arrangements for their care

• Provide them information on who they should call if they feel unwell (their GP phone number and 111) and how to use NHS inform
• Access advice on creating a contingency plan from Carers UK
• Find out about different sources of support that could be used
• Look after your own well-being and physical health

Advice for unpaid carers is available at:

Should I stop my medication if I think I may be infected with the virus?

It depends - your treatment plan is individual to you. You should not change your medication unless told to by your GP or rheumatologist. If you develop symptoms of any infection, seek advice from your rheumatology team, as they may advise you to alter your medication. For those on glucocorticoids (steroids, prednisolone), the expectation is that treatment should not be stopped abruptly.

As we are being asked to stay at home for a prolonged period, how can I maintain a positive mental health?

We understand that the situation you may be facing at the moment, due to Coronavirus/COVID-19 and your health condition can increase anxiety.

There are simple things you can do that may help, to stay mentally and physically active during this time, such as:

• Exercise regularly - look for ideas of exercises you can do at home
• Spend time doing things you enjoy – this might include reading, cooking, other indoor hobbies or listening to/watching favourite radio or TV programmes
• Eat healthy, well-balanced meals
• Drink enough water
• Try to avoid smoking, alcohol and drugs
• Keep your windows open to let in fresh air
• Arrange a space to sit with a nice view, if possible
• Get some natural sunlight if you can or sit on your front step, staying more than 2 metres away from others

Support in dealing with anxiety around impacts of Coronavirus can also be found at:

https://breathingspace.scot/
https://www.samh.org.uk/
https://www.supportinmindscotland.org.uk/

Tips on how to cope if you are worried about Coronavirus and in isolation can be found at:

NHS Inform has further resources to help your mental wellbeing:


**Are my carers, and/ or friends and family still allowed to visit my home?**

You should let your regular visitors know that you are reducing social contacts and they shouldn’t visit you during this time, unless they are providing essential care for you. Essential care includes things like help with washing, dressing, or preparing meals.

If you receive regular health or social care from an organisation, either through your local authority or paid for by yourself, inform your care providers that you are reducing social contacts and agree a plan for continuing your care.

If you receive essential care from friends or family members, these carers can continue to visit. Carers will be provided with gloves and facemasks to reduce the risk of passing on infection.

It’s also a good idea to speak to your carers about what happens if one of them becomes unwell. If you need help with care but you’re not sure who to contact, your local council should be able to help you.

If you need help with care but you’re not sure who to contact please visit

https://careinfoscotland.scot/topics/how-to-get-care-services