

# COVID-19 (Coronavirus)

## Information for patients receiving cancer treatment

### **Will cancer treatment increase the risk of contracting COVID-19?**

Certain anti-cancer treatments such as chemotherapy or radiotherapy may affect your immune system and make it less able to prevent or resist infection. This immune inhibition is usually short-lived and normal immunity recovers after several weeks. Not all cancer treatments will compromise the immune system, but your cancer doctor will tell you if you are at risk of immune compromise with your treatment.

Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a new strain of a common virus and we are still learning how it works. If an immune compromised patient is exposed to COVID-19 they may be at increased risk of becoming infected. The symptoms of COVID-19 can be very mild in many people below the age of 50 who are infected. However, active cancer treatment may also mean that a patient is more likely to develop a serious complication of infection; e.g. pneumonia. The risk of catching COVID-19 in Australia remains low to moderate, but this may change in future.

### **Is it still ok to travel overseas?**

If you are receiving anti-cancer treatments, you are advised not to travel outside of Australia at present.

### **What if you are immunosuppressed due to active cancer treatment and develop symptoms?**

The symptoms of this virus include fever, sore throat, cough and breathing difficulties. It is sometimes like the common cold or flu. If you have **not** been in contact with someone who has travelled overseas or with someone who has a confirmed or probable case of COVID-19 or attended a health centre/hospital where patients with COVID-19 were being treated, then you are considered not at high risk of having the virus. If you have symptoms that you are worried about phone your cancer clinic or GP.

### **Is it advised for patients with cancer and survivors to self-isolate as a precaution?**

Currently the advice for people to self-isolate **only** applies to those who have symptoms and have been to high risk countries (China, Iran, South Korea, Italy) in the last 14 days, or when directed by authorities after close contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19, or those who have tested positive for COVID-19.

## **What groups are most at risk from COVID-19?**

It is still not known for sure which groups are most at risk of complications (i.e. more likely to be very unwell) if they catch COVID-19, but it is likely you are more at risk if you catch the virus and:

- You are 65 years of age and over
- You have a long-term medical condition – for example, heart disease, lung disease, diabetes, or liver disease.

## **Should an immunosuppressed person take public transport?**

When you are immunosuppressed, it is recommended to avoid public transport at busy times during rush hour in order to limit close contact, however as the risk of catching COVID-19 in Australia is still low it is not necessary for family members to take similar precautions.

## **Do those undergoing cancer treatment and their family members need to take extra precautions?**

When undergoing many types of cancer treatment your immune system may be weakened due to treatment. You will be advised if this is the case and educated on extra precautions that need to be taken such as more frequent hand washing, daily temperature monitoring, and avoiding anyone who is sick as well as large crowds.

## **Steps that can be taken to reduce infection from COVID-19 (and other similar infections such as flu) include:**

- Regular and thorough hand washing and use of alcohol-based hand washes when in contact with other people, before eating or touching your face, after using the bathroom or upon entering the home.
- Those around a cancer patient should practice good respiratory hygiene by covering your mouth and nose with a flexed elbow or tissue when coughing or sneezing, discarding used tissues immediately into a closed bin, and cleaning your hands with alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands as this can transfer the virus from surfaces.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces.
- Maintain social distancing outside of the home environment by leaving at least a one metre distance between yourself and other people, particularly those who are coughing, sneezing or who have a fever.
- Being cautious around public travel, public events or larger gatherings, which might bring you into contact with more people who may be at higher risk of carrying infection.
- Ensuring that visitors are aware that those affected by cancer are particularly susceptible to infection, and kindly requesting them not to visit if they are displaying any symptoms of illness such as high temperature, coughing, sneezing, headache, etc.
- Limiting direct contact with people who have travelled outside of Australia in the past 14 days.
- Don't wear a face mask if you are well
- Get the flu shot (available April). This won't protect you from COVID-19, but it will reduce your risk of getting flu.

## **If you are not feeling well**

If within the past 14 days you have travelled to any country outside Australia - or in contact with a person known to have COVID-19, be alert for the symptoms. These are: fever (high temperature), coughing or difficulty breathing. If you do have these symptoms phone your GP, local emergency department or cancer clinic without delay, and do not attend in person in the first instance. Avoid contact with other people by self-isolating until you receive advice from a doctor.

## **If you are feeling well**

If you are feeling well, carry on with your normal routine. Follow the advice on how to protect yourself from COVID-19 and other infections such as flu. Avoid spending time with people who are ill with a cough, high temperature, or breathing problems. For up to date advice on COVID-19/Coronavirus, visit <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus>

## **Should I still attend for my treatment in hospital?**

Yes, you should continue to attend for your scheduled medical care unless advised by your hospital not to do so. It's very natural to have concerns when you're being treated for a serious illness. If you are concerned, contact your cancer clinic. Every day our major hospitals handle cases of people who have infections that could be passed to other patients. There are many different ways to monitor infection risk and protect you from infection while you are receiving treatment.

*Please note the information on this page is for general guidance. All of the detail is derived from national and international guidance, and is subject to change as information is being updated rapidly. The information is not intended to replace the individual support of a medical professional. There are many different types of cancer, treatments and complications. This information is a general guide and certain forms of cancer or treatment may require more specialist guidance from a doctor.*