

COVID-19 (Coronavirus)

Information for patients who are receiving biologics medication through the PBS or a clinical trial

Am I at greater risk of contracting COVID-19?

Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a new strain of a common virus. We are still learning how it works. COVID-19 is spread by coughing or sneezing, or by touching contaminated objects. COVID-19 is tested by taking a swab from inside your nose or mouth.

We know that some medications, including biologics, can affect the immune system. If you are taking biologics, you are at greater risk of developing an infection, including COVID-19. You may also be at higher risk of getting very sick from COVID-19 if you are infected.

The risk of becoming infected with COVID-19 in Australia is low to moderate. This may change in the future. For the most up to date information please visit the Department of Health website.

<https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus>

Who is at risk of contracting COVID-19?

Those at greatest risk of contracting COVID-19 are:

- People who you have travelled overseas; or
- People who have had close contact with someone who has a confirmed case of COVID-19.

What if I am taking biologics medication and develop symptoms of COVID-19?

The symptoms of the virus are similar to the symptoms of a common cold or flu. They can include fever, sore throat, cough, breathing difficulties (shortness of breath) and fatigue.

If you have symptoms or are feeling unwell and you are worried, please call your biologics nurse, clinical trial coordinator or trial doctor for further advice. You can contact St Vincent's on 1800 444 511. You can also get advice from your GP or the COVID-19 Hotline on 1800 675 398.

Should I stop taking my biologics or trial medication?

Most people should continue taking their biologic medication. This advice may change as more information becomes available. If you stop taking your medication you may have a flare of your disease. This may increase the risk of complications if you are infected with COVID-19.

If you have a **suspected or confirmed COVID-19** infection, you should stop taking your medication and contact your biologics nurse or trial coordinator straight away. It is important not to take medications that target the immune system if you have an active infection.

You will not start taking the medication again until the infection is gone, or a test shows you do not have COVID-19.

If you have had close contact with someone who has been diagnosed with COVID-19, you will be asked to stop taking immunosuppressive medication until your own COVID-19 test result is negative (clear). You will need to self-isolate for 14 days, as per government guidelines. You will not be able to start therapy again until you have finished 14 days of self isolation.

You do **not** need to stop any topical medications.

Should I self-isolate as a precaution?

All Australians are now advised to stay at home. You should only leave home if you need to:

- shop for food and essential supplies
- seek medical care
- exercise (no more than 2 people together at once)
- work and study if you can't work or learn from home.

If you are waiting on a test result for COVID-19, you must avoid contact with people. You must self-isolate until your result is negative (clear).

Should I take public transport?

When you are immuno-suppressed, it is recommended to avoid public transport if possible to limit close contact.

Is it still ok to travel overseas?

No. The current advice from the Australian government is that all overseas travel must stop until further notice. For the most up to date information on travel please visit the Smart Traveller website. <https://www.smartraveller.gov.au/COVID-19-australian-travellers>

What can I do to reduce my risk of COVID-19 infection?

- Wash your hands often with soap and running water, for at least 20 seconds. Dry with paper towel or hand dryer. If you use topical steroids or creams, please wash your hands thoroughly before putting on the cream.

- Try not to touch your face, especially your eyes, nose or mouth.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the bin straight away. If you don't have a tissue, cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve or flexed elbow.
- Stay at home as much as possible.
- Phone your clinic nurse or trial coordinator to talk about your medication if you do become unwell.
- Continue healthy habits: exercise, drink water, get plenty of sleep.
- You do not need to wear a face mask if you are well.
- Practice good social-distancing. This includes standing at least one metre and a half (1.5m) from the person next to you, stop shaking hands, kissing or hugging as a greeting and avoid crowds.
- Keep your house clean - normal household detergent should kill the virus.

Although it will not protect you from COVID-19, we encourage all patients on biologic medications to get their annual flu vaccination and remain up to date with other vaccines.

How we are keeping you safe at St Vincent's

This is what we are doing to help keep you safe:

- All of our staff are trained in preventing the spread of infection.
- We will continue to wash our hands, disinfect equipment and use protective gloves, masks and gowns.
- We will continue to check on your health and wellbeing.
- We will limit all non-essential visitors to St Vincent's Hospital.
- We will stop anyone with respiratory symptoms or fever from entering our facility.
- We are exploring the option of reviewing patients via telehealth (phone or video-call) consultation.

We are committed to supporting you in the community.

Key points to remember

Everyone should practice good social distancing and wash their hands. Avoid crowds and situations where you may be exposed. Wherever possible, we will try to change your clinic appointment to a telehealth consult (phone or video call).

For up to date information on COVID-19 visit <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus>

Please note that the information on this document is for general guidance purposes only. All information has been sourced from both national and international advice and is subject to change rapidly as new information becomes available. This information does not replace information provided directly to you by your medical practitioner.