

Updated COVID-19 Advice for Rheumatology Patients

Patients with Rheumatological diseases requiring immunosuppressants and their families have ongoing concerns in light of the current coronavirus pandemic. We are posting our most up to date advice on the LTHT website (see link below).

The situation in the UK is continuously changing with advice being updated regularly and this will increasingly be at a local level. We therefore recommend that you follow the advice being provided by Public Health England and your local council (national website addresses also provided below).

What can I do to reduce my risk?

As has been recommended by the Government, the best course of action to reduce the risk of contracting COVID-19 is to:

1. stay at home as much as possible
2. work from home if you can
3. limit contact with other people
4. keep your distance from people not in your household (2 metres apart where possible)
5. wash your hands regularly
6. Wear a face covering on public transport, in shops and supermarkets. You are also encouraged to wear a face covering if you are in an enclosed public space and can't maintain social distancing.

Please note that we are unable to provide exemption letters for face masks.

We have previously published a guide for immunosuppressed patients which included a flow chart which allowed you to assess your risk of COVID-19. You may have used this to work out if you are in the shielding, strict social distancing or standard social distancing category.

In March 2020, the government advised *shielding* for those individuals in high risk groups (see website below). If you were in this shielding category, you will have had a letter from us, your GP or the government telling you about this. This period of shielding is coming to an end.

I am currently shielding. How does the recent government advice apply to me?

From the 6th July, the government **recommendations** for **shielding individuals** have been relaxed recommending:

1. you no longer need to socially distance from people you live with
2. you can meet in a group of up to 6 people outdoors, including people from other households, with 2m social distancing.
3. you may also form a 'support bubble' with one other household if you want to, but one of the households in the 'support bubble' should be a single adult household. You can all spend time together outside and inside each other's homes, including overnight, without needing to socially distance.

From the **1st August**, the recommendations are to be relaxed further and the government will no longer be advising you to shield. They will recommend:

1. you can go to work, as long as the workplace is COVID-secure (see link below) – but carry on working from home if you can
2. you can go outside to buy food, to places of worship and for exercise – keeping 2 metres away wherever possible

We also advise that you take extra care, ensuring you maintain 2 metres social distancing whenever outside of your household/ support bubble and to wear a facemask if this is not possible.

Should advice change again (nationally, or regionally if there is a local outbreak), please follow the most up to date advice from the government for shielding individuals (link below).

I haven't been shielding but I am currently following strict social distancing. How does the recent government advice apply to me?

From the 6th July, we recommend that you follow the government's *standard* social distancing recommendations for the general population. In particular, we recommend:

1. you can go to work, as long as the workplace is COVID-secure – but carry on working from home if you can
2. you can go outside to buy food, to places of worship and for exercise – keeping 2 metres away wherever possible

However we also advise that you take extra care, ensuring you maintain 2 metres social distancing whenever outside of your household and to wear a facemask if this is not possible.

Should there be a national or local outbreak and high risk patients are asked to shield again, we recommend you follow our previous strict social distancing advice (stay at home, not to go out of the house to work, not exercise outside the house and let someone else do the shopping and collect your medication).

I am a health care worker. Should I return to work?

Caring for patients in hospital could potentially lead to greater exposure to the virus. Therefore, we recommend that if you fall into the shielding category, from 1st August you only return to work in 'cold' and 'supercold' areas/wards (for example, a ward where patients have had a negative COVID-19 swab before being admitted). These are areas where the risk of being exposed to virus is minimal.

If you are in the strict social distancing category we recommend you also only return to work from the 6th July in 'cold' and 'supercold' areas/wards. However, if the general prevalence of the virus is low, you can also work in 'indeterminate' areas/wards.

Please discuss which area you work in with your employer if you are unsure.

Should I stop my immunosuppressants/rheumatology medication?

Our general advice is to continue all your immunosuppressant medications because the health risk associated with a flare of your disease is likely to be greater than the risks

associated with COVID-19. This is because of (i) symptoms of your disease itself; (ii) infection risk can be higher if your disease is not well controlled; (iii) if you had a flare, the treatments needed to control the flare could be more risky than your current treatment.

What should I do with my medication if I develop symptoms of an infection?

- If you develop a viral infection and your rheumatological condition is stable, immunosuppressants should be paused, as with any infection.
- If you are off your immunosuppressant medication for longer than 2 weeks please inform your rheumatology team.
- If your rheumatological condition has been **active** recently, please contact the rheumatology helpline, so that we can provide individual advice about risks of stopping treatment.
- Of particular note, steroids should **NOT** be stopped suddenly if you have taken more than 5mg for more than 4 weeks. The dose may need to be increased for those taking less than 20mg of prednisolone who become moderately or severely unwell and you should always keep at least a two-week supply of steroids at home. Please see our steroid advice sheet and flow chart if this applies to you **AND** make sure you tell your treating doctors that you are taking steroids. Please contact the helpline for advice if you are taking prednisolone and become unwell.

Do I still come for my hospital appointment?

All routine appointments will now be carried out by telephone to avoid the need for patients to travel and attend hospital. You will receive full written information beforehand as to how this consultation will work in practice and what you need to do. Only patients who have been told to come for a face-to-face appointment should attend the hospital for their appointment. We appreciate that this is a significant change in how the NHS has operated, but it is necessary to protect you and your family. You may be asked to have a COVID-19 swab test before coming for a face-to-face appointment. We will let you know about this when we arrange your appointment with you.

PLEASE DO NOT ATTEND THE HOSPITAL OR YOUR GP'S SURGERY IF YOU HAVE A CONTINUOUS COUGH, A FEVER OR NEW LOSS OF TASTE/SMELL. You should self-isolate and follow NHS advice regarding testing for COVID-19, which is continuously updated [click for guidance](#) (or see website below). This site handles issues around travel, sick leave, rights, cancellations, contagion advice and needs to be your number one site for reliable advice. Please be wary of a large number of hoax emails, websites, tweets and text messages or advice online from seemingly legitimate 'doctors'. All advice should be sought from the links provided in this document.

If you have a flare or need further advice on your rheumatology condition, the rheumatology helpline (0113 3924444) is still available. During working hours live calls are answered, with messages received on an answerphone outside of these times. Thank you for your understanding. A link is also provided for NHS Mental Health Matters due to COVID-19.

Summary of links provided above

LTHT Website for local information

<https://www.leedsth.nhs.uk/a-z-of-services/rheumatology/>

Public Health England Guidance

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>

Government Shielding Guidance

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19>

Government Coronavirus Guidance

<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>

NHS Advice on Coronavirus Self-treatment

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>

NHS Mental Health Matters dedicated to COVID

<https://www.mhm.org.uk/news/coronavirus-covid-19>

Working safely during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak

<https://www.hse.gov.uk/coronavirus/working-safely/covid-secure.htm>

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19>