

## COVID-19 Advice for Rheumatology Patients

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

The situation in the UK is changing rapidly with advice being updated daily and we therefore recommend that you follow the advice being provided by Public Health England, which are being reviewed and updated regularly (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 by staying at home (only leaving for work, medical need, essential items and once daily exercise) and frequent hand washing. The government now also advises *shielding* for those individuals in high risk groups (see website below).

**Our flow chart can help you determine whether you are in this high risk group and need to follow the *shielding* guidance. Please read it carefully to see if it applies to you. We have produced a video to help you follow this guidance (see below).**

High risk groups can include patients with rheumatic diseases that need treatment with steroids (prednisolone) and immunosuppressants, however, not everyone on these medications will be in the highest risk group requiring *shielding*.

Using the flow chart, you may find you are in the ***strict social distancing*** risk group, in which case we advise you to 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.

Immunosuppressants, “biologic” medicines, which are given by injection or infusion, and targeted synthetic medications for which this guidance applies are listed in the Blue Box on the flow chart. If you do not take steroids or one of these medications please follow current UK government advice.

Importantly, this does **NOT** apply to the following medications colchicine, chloroquine, hydroxychloroquine, sulphasalazine, dapsone, allopurinol or occasional use of steroids (such as “depo injections”), steroid mouthwashes or most steroid creams, unless advised differently by your GP or consultant dermatologist.

### **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 risky.

### **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. 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 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.

**PLEASE DO NOT ATTEND THE HOSPITAL OR YOUR GP'S SURGERY IF YOU HAVE A CONTINUOUS COUGH AND OR A FEVER.** You should self-isolate and follow NHS advice, 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, however our response times may be slightly longer than usual due to the high numbers of calls we are receiving. Thank you for your understanding. A link is also provided for NHS Mental Health Matters due to COVID

### **Summary of links provided above**

#### **LTHT Website for local information**

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

#### **LTHT Flow Chart Video**

[https://youtu.be/qdLctvFMp\\_E](https://youtu.be/qdLctvFMp_E)

#### **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 Staying At Home Guidance**

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/874742/Full\\_guidance\\_on\\_staying\\_at\\_home\\_and\\_away\\_from\\_others\\_\\_1\\_.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/874742/Full_guidance_on_staying_at_home_and_away_from_others__1_.pdf)

#### **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>