



COVID-19 Important advice for people with cancer in Northern Ireland (updated February 2021)

COVID-19 or coronavirus is an illness that can affect your lungs and airways. The main symptoms of Coronavirus (COVID-19) are a new and consistent cough, a high temperature (37.8°C) and in severe cases shortness of breath.

For most people symptoms will be mild but for some people with weakened immune systems, older people, and those with long-term conditions like diabetes, chronic lung disease and cancer there is an increased risk of complications.

How might Coronavirus/COVID-19 affect me?

Some people with cancer are more at risk of becoming ill if they contract COVID-19 infection. This is because

- All cancer patients may have a weakened immune system. Treatments like chemotherapy and radiotherapy also impact on your immune system.
- Some cancer treatments can make it more difficult for patients to fight infection.

Our cancer specialists are actively discussing the additional risks posed by the COVID infection with their patients to help them decide on the best course of action.

Your cancer treatment plan is individual to you. Your doctor may want to review your treatment plan with you to ensure it still best suits your needs and discuss any changes that might be appropriate. This will only ever be done to reduce your overall risk of harm.

What do I do if I feel unwell or develop side effects while on cancer treatment?

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

If you have a temperature or shivering flu-like symptoms while you are on treatment for cancer **contact your local cancer unit helpline**. You will have received this number on an alert card when your cancer treatment started. They will ask you a series of questions and give you advice or arrange for you to have a medical review at your nearest hospital.

What do I do if I have had direct contact with someone with confirmed COVID-19?

If you have been in contact with someone who has confirmed COVID-19 and you have symptoms, **ring your unit helpline**. If you have had contact but you have no symptoms, get advice by contacting the NHS helpline, call 111. Remember to let the person you are speaking to know that you have had, or are having treatment for cancer.

Will my cancer treatment change because of COVID-19?

If you are being treated with chemotherapy or radiotherapy individual decisions based on the benefits and risks of treatment will be discussed with you as the rate of COVID-19 rises in the community.

Your clinical team will try to minimise the time you spend at hospital for example by arranging telephone consultations and offering blood tests at a different location or extending your prescriptions. Make sure your hospital and GP have your most up to date contact details.

Please assume that all appointments will continue, check with your clinical team first in case different arrangements need to be made.

If you do need to come to hospital for appointments please take extra care and practice social distancing.

Can I be visited in hospital or accompanied to appointments?

Visits by friends or relatives, or being accompanied to appointments is now restricted. Guidance may change so please contact your hospital for advice.

If someone needs to visit you it is important they wash their hands on arrival and often after that. They should also maintain social distance in car parks and on the way into hospital.

I have been identified as being clinically extremely vulnerable and at higher risk of illness, in a letter from my GP or hospital. Is there something I need to do differently to reduce the risk of COVID-19?

The safest course of action is to stay at home at all times and to avoid face to face contact with others except for carers and healthcare workers who must see you as part of your medical care.

Others in your household should support you to stay safe and closely follow guidance on social distancing by reducing their contact inside and outside the home.

For detailed information on reducing risk of infection and social distancing see the section below.

What should others in my household do to protect me?

The rest of your household should support you to stay safe and strictly follow guidance on social distancing, reducing their contact outside the home.

In your home, you should:

- minimise the time you spend with others in shared spaces (kitchen, bathroom and sitting areas) and keep shared spaces well ventilated
- aim to keep 2 metres (3 steps) 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 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.

What should I do to collect my routine medication?

If you are running out of your routine medications and need to collect your next prescription you should seek help from a friend or family member to deliver it for you. You can also contact your local pharmacy to arrange for a volunteer to deliver your medication. You may also need to arrange for collection or delivery of hospital specialist medication prescribed to you by your hospital team.

I did not receive a clinically extremely vulnerable letter, how can I reduce my risk of getting COVID-19?

It is important to try to reduce the risk of infection :

- Stay at home as much as possible
- Wash your hands with soap and water often and for at least 20 seconds
- Always wash your hands when you get home or into work
- Use hand sanitiser gel if soap and water is not available
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve when you cough or sneeze (do not use your hand). Put used tissues in the bin immediately and wash your hands
- Avoid contact with someone who is displaying symptoms of COVID -19, including temperature, cough or colds
- Avoid non-essential use of public transport
- Work from home where possible
- Avoid gatherings in smaller public spaces and avoid gatherings with family and friends. Keep in touch using remote technology, such as phone, internet and social media.
- Use telephone or online services to contact your GP or other essential services.

The NICaN website also has a link to the government guide on social distancing.

COVID-19 vaccination

The government recommends that people who are at higher risk of becoming seriously ill due to COVID-19 infection should have the vaccine. Certain categories of patients have been prioritised to be offered the vaccine. This includes people with lowered immunity due to disease such as cancer, and due to treatment, such as chemotherapy or radiotherapy. It also includes people affected by blood cancer (such as leukaemia, lymphoma or myeloma).

We have no concerns about people who are receiving chemotherapy, immunotherapy, targeted therapy or radiotherapy having their COVID-19 vaccination.

In Northern Ireland two types of COVID-19 vaccine have been approved for use and we expect others to be approved soon. They both require two doses to provide the best protection. If offered a COVID-19 vaccine, you should have no concerns about which vaccine is offered.

Some people with cancer and blood disorders have lowered immunity and might not respond as well as others to vaccination. At present, there is no information on how well people with lowered immunity respond to the COVID-19 vaccines. However, there are no particular safety concerns about using the vaccines in people with lowered immunity. The vaccines are not live and cannot cause infections

After having the vaccine, it is important to carry on taking appropriate measures to reduce your risk of infection

For more information on COVID-19 vaccination please go to
<http://www.nican.hscninet/covid-19>

Information Care and Support

How can I maintain positive mental health?

We understand that the situation you are facing at the moment due to COVID-19 can increase anxiety. Here are a few tips to follow to help you look after your mental health

- Look for ideas for exercises to do at home (check with Macmillan Information services for information on physical activity opportunities).
- Spend time doing things you enjoy
- Try to eat healthy, well balanced meals
- Try to avoid smoking and alcohol
- Try to spend time with the windows open to let in fresh air and natural light
- Try to stay connected with family and friends via social media
- Most importantly, get support if you need it, see some sources below
- Contact the Macmillan Information and Support Services in your trust for support with looking after your emotional and mental wellbeing (see details below).

Who can I call for support?

If you have concerns related to cancer or your treatment, contact your cancer clinical team.

Emotional and practical support.

If you have any concerns about treatment, anxiety, isolation, or practical matters such as work and finances, the Macmillan Support and Information Services in your Trust can answer any of your concerns or queries, or put you in touch with someone who can. These services they keep up to date with information and support available from all trust services and other charity partners. They will also be able to advise of any activities or support that you can access online. They provide a free service that is available to people at all stages of the cancer experience.

See the Northern Ireland Cancer Network (NICaN) website for your local contact details.
<https://nican.hscni.net/info-for-patients-public/local-macmillan-cancer-information-and-support-services/>

Other helplines

- CRUK nurses helpline: 0808 800 4040 (Mon to Fri 9 to 5pm)
- Macmillan Cancer Support - support line 0808 808 0000
- Macmillan welfare help : Advice Space (NI): 0300 1233 233 <https://www.advicespace.me/>

Useful links

Northern Ireland Cancer Network <https://nican.hscni.net/>

Macmillan Cancer Support Coronavirus <https://www.macmillan.org.uk/coronavirus>

CRUK - Coronavirus <http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/>

Public Health Agency <https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/>