



COVID-19: advice for people with cancer in Northern Ireland

(Updated 21st January 2022)

Coronavirus is still circulating in our communities and you may have increased anxiety with the new Omicron variant. It is important that people with cancer and those that you live with continue to take extra care. This leaflet includes some information to help you protect yourself including information on coronavirus treatments for those at highest risk from coronavirus. It includes information on

1. How might Coronavirus/COVID-19 affect you
2. Clinically extremely vulnerable
3. Improving safety through routine COVID-19 lateral flow testing
- 4. New - Coronavirus treatment for clinically vulnerable people with cancer**
5. COVID-19 vaccination
6. Other vaccinations to help protect you
7. Will cancer treatment change
8. Information care and support

COVID-19 is an illness that can affect your lungs and airways. The main symptoms of a Coronavirus infection (COVID-19) are:

- a new continuous cough, a high temperature (37.8°C), a loss or change to sense of smell or taste and in severe cases shortness of breath

Additional symptoms of the newer variations of COVID-19, or in those who have been vaccinated also include headache, sneezing, runny nose, and or sore throat.

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 with COVID-19.

1. 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 cancer patients may have a weakened immune system and

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

As rates of coronavirus change our cancer specialists discuss the additional risks posed by the COVID-19 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 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 or Covid 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 and also arrange a PCR test (see how to on the link below)**. If you have been in contact with someone who has confirmed COVID-19 but you have no symptoms follow the government advice ([Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): self-isolating and close contacts | nidirect](#)) and continue to take regular lateral flow tests.

If you have Coronavirus and you are part of a high risk group you may be eligible for coronavirus treatments (see section 4 for more information).

To book a PCR test : [Get a free PCR test to check if you have coronavirus \(COVID-19\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

2. Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV)

I have been identified as being clinically extremely vulnerable and at higher risk of illness. Is there something I need to do differently to reduce the risk of COVID-19?

If you are clinically extremely vulnerable it is important to remember that the virus is still circulating. It is vitally important that you continue to exercise great care and follow the advice to:

- Limit household contacts and keep the number of social interactions that you have low - the fewer social interactions you have, the lower your risk of catching COVID-19
- [Follow social distancing guidelines and wash your hands well and often](#)
- Use a face covering and encourage others to do so too. Try to spend as little time as possible in an indoor setting, where ventilation is likely to be less good. If possible try to improve ventilation, for example open windows.
- Take regular lateral flow tests - If you do have Coronavirus and you are part of a high risk group you may be eligible for coronavirus treatments (see section 3 and 4 for more information).

In terms of what is best for you as an individual, you should assess the risk in light of the above and take advice from your GP or your hospital health care team.

What can others in my household do to protect me?

- The rest of your household should support you to stay safe. They can do this by:
- Ensuring they get both doses of a COVID-19 vaccination; see below for more information (this includes children aged 12+)
- Get their COVID-19 booster vaccine
- Get the flu vaccine (if eligible) to protect them and you from flu
- Reduce their contact outside the home where possible and strictly follow guidance on social distancing (noted above).

3. Improving safety through routine COVID-19 Lateral Flow Testing

About 1 in 3 people with COVID-19 do not have symptoms but can still infect others. Even if vaccinated, there is still a chance people can pass COVID-19 on. To help protect you and reduce your risk of the spread of COVID-19 your healthcare providers advise that you and your household contacts take a regular lateral flow test twice per week (every 3-4 days) **and before every attendance at hospital.**

A lateral flow test is easy to take and can be done in your own home. It gives a quick result in as little as 30 minutes. To reduce your risk further you could ask those who plan to visit you either at home or when in the hospital to take a Lateral Flow Test before their visit.

How to obtain Lateral Flow Tests: You can collect Lateral Flow Tests for free from various outlets across Northern Ireland, such as local test sites, community sites and most pharmacies. To find an outlet near you, type the following into your internet browser (or click), <https://maps.test-and-trace.nhs.uk>. To report your results go to: <https://www.gov.uk/report-covid19-result>, this will allow contact tracing process to begin.

From 5th January 2022, non-symptomatic people in NI who get a positive lateral flow test will no longer need a PCR test to confirm their result. **However, If you have a condition that puts you at highest risk from COVID-19 it is important that follow up a positive lateral follow test with a PCR test. This will allow you to access treatments for Coronavirus if eligible, see more below.**

4. COVID treatments for people with cancer

Selected groups of people, including some vulnerable cancer patients, who develop COVID-19, may be eligible for a new treatment that may reduce risk of hospitalisation. These treatments may be accessible to eligible people aged 12 years and over.

Eligible people include those with an impaired immune function who would be at significant risk of serious COVID-19 illness such as:

- those with active metastatic cancer and active solid cancers, (a cancer at any stage that has not been removed),
- patients with certain blood cell (haematological) cancers
- patients who have undergone stem cell procedures or CAR-T cell therapy within certain time frames,
- patients receiving certain types of chemotherapy within the last 12 months,
- patients who have received radiotherapy within the last 6 months.

A full list of conditions is available on the Department of Health website([Interim Clinical Commissioning Policy: Neutralising monoclonal antibodies or antivirals for non-hospitalised patients with COVID-19 | Department of Health \(health-ni.gov.uk\)](#))

If eligible how will I access a COVID-19 treatment?

If you get a positive lateral flow test, or have symptoms **you need to take a PCR test to get access to COVID-19 treatment.** You should take a PCR test as soon as possible as it is important to start the treatment within a recommended time period (within 5 days from symptoms starting or a positive PCR).

You can book at a test centre, even if your symptoms are mild.

To book a PCR test : [Get a free PCR test to check if you have coronavirus \(COVID-19\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

When booking your test, the booking portal will allow you to indicate that you are in a high risk group. It's important to enter your postcode and telephone number correctly and, if known, your Health and Care number. This is so the Health Service can contact you about treatment if you are eligible.

If your PCR test is positive what happens next.

As well as receiving a positive PCR test result; if eligible you will also receive a second message informing you that your local trust will be in touch. Your trust will review information in your medical records to check if you are suitable for treatment, and will be in contact to discuss this further. *Please note this may come from an unknown or withheld number.*

If you test positive and do not receive any messages about treatment but feel you are eligible as you fall into one of the groups noted above, you can contact your GP practice or your healthcare team at your cancer unit to discuss this.

Please note as COVID 19 testing and treatment information may change it is important you regularly check for the most up to date information on NI direct [-Treatments for coronavirus \(COVID-19\) | nidirect](#)

5. 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. 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.

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.**

Any household contacts/children of CEV people aged 12 to 15 years are eligible to receive the COVID-19 vaccination. This aims to reduce the risk of infection to you by vaccinating those most likely to transmit to you.

COVID- 19 vaccination 3rd dose.

An extra (3rd) dose will have been offered to those most vulnerable to maintain protection given by the first and second doses. If you haven't already done so please ask your GP about your 3rd dose vaccine.

A further 4th dose or booster programme has now become available pending further advice in 2022. For updates on COVID-19 vaccination please keep checking NI Direct at [Get a COVID-19 vaccination and booster in Northern Ireland | nidirect](#)

6. Other vaccinations to help protect you

Seasonal flu and Pneumococcal Infection (Pneumonia) vaccine

Early evidence suggests that co-infection with flu and COVID-19 is associated with increased severity of disease and mortality compared to those with COVID-19 alone. **Receiving the flu vaccination this year is therefore more important than ever to ensure best protection against flu.** The vaccines cannot cause flu or a pneumococcal infection.

Flu and Pneumococcal vaccine

You will have been notified by your GP for these vaccinations. Please note

- Your vaccines should be given in the week before your next dose of chemotherapy but not on the day before, or the day of your treatment.
- Patients with aplastic anaemia **should consult** their haematologist for advice.
- Adolescents with a cancer diagnosis **should not** accept use of nasal vaccine for the

flu which contains live virus.

Eligibility for household contacts and children

Those eligible for influenza vaccination in 2021 to 2022 are:

- all preschool children aged 2 to 4 years on 1 September 2021
- all primary and secondary (up to year 12) school children
- those aged 6 months to 2 years and 16 to 49 years in clinical risk groups
- pregnant women
- those aged 50 years and over
- those in long-stay residential care homes
- carers
- **close contacts of immunocompromised individuals**

Shingles vaccination

Shingles vaccination is offered to those aged 70 to 79 years in Northern Ireland. It is important that you take up the offer of vaccination at your GP surgery to protect yourself against shingles. Patients with impaired immunity are at increased risk of developing shingles and in these individuals it can be a particularly severe illness.

New shingles vaccine for those with impaired immunity

In previous years those with weakened immunity such as patients receiving chemotherapy and many people with haematology disorders, were advised NOT to accept a shingles vaccine because only a live vaccine, Zostavax was available. However, there is now an alternative vaccine available called Shingrix. Shingrix is NOT LIVE and cannot cause shingles. **Shingrix will be offered to everyone aged 70 to 79 years on 1st September 2021 who is considered immunocompromised and cannot receive the live Zostavax vaccine.**

The table below lists the more common reasons for impaired immunity and indications for the Shingrix vaccine. For further information on who is eligible for the Shingrix vaccine please contact your GP, haematologist or oncologist who will have detailed information on who should receive the Shingrix vaccine.

Shingles vaccine

In general, you **should** receive the Shingrix recombinant shingles vaccine if you are aged 70-79 years and if you have:

- Had chemotherapy within the last 6 months
- Chronic leukaemia, lymphoma, myeloma or bone marrow suppression
- High-dose steroids in the last 3 months
- 'Biologics' in the last year
- A stem cell transplant (until your haematologist advises).

Contact your haematologist /oncologist for advice if you are due to start chemotherapy or immunosuppression drugs.

7. 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 levels of COVID-19 change 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 may be restricted. Guidance may change so please contact your hospital for advice.

Service pressures as a result of COVID-19

It takes a team of many different health professionals to deliver cancer treatments. Like other members of the public, staff may be exposed to the virus and, as the prevalence of the virus in the community increases again, we anticipate that staff shortages are likely to result in additional pressure on the service. There will inevitably be some disruption to our service over the next few weeks however please be assured we are working hard to reduce the impact of this on cancer treatment.

8. 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 your local Trust Macmillan Information services for information on physical activity opportunities)
- Spend time doing things you enjoy
- Try to eat healthy, well balanced meals and 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 virtually and 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**

For 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 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 9am 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/>

Public Health Agency

<https://www.publichealth.hscni.net/>

Macmillan Cancer Support Coronavirus

<https://www.macmillan.org.uk/coronavirus>

CRUK - Coronavirus

<http://www.cancerresearchuk.org/>

NIDIRECT: Coronavirus information

- COVID Vaccine info: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/get-covid-19-vaccination-northern-ireland#toc-0>
- COVID Treatments info <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/treatments-coronavirus-covid-19>

TESTING links

- Finding lateral flow tests - <https://maps.test-and-trace.nhs.uk>
- Reporting a positive lateral flow test- <https://www.gov.uk/report-covid19-result>.
- **To book a PCR test :** [Get a free PCR test to check if you have coronavirus \(COVID-19\) - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

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