

COVID-19 (Coronavirus)



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

Does biologic treatment increase the risk of contracting COVID-19 or the severity of the infection?

COVID-19 is a new strain of a common family of viruses (coronaviruses) and we are still learning how it works. Human coronaviruses are spread through contaminated droplets 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 certain medications, including biologics, can affect the immune system and therefore patients can be at a greater risk of developing an infection including COVID-19. Experience from overseas would suggest that patients on medications that affect the immune system may be at higher risk of a more severe infection or complications from COVID-19 if they are infected. In clinical trials, the most frequent adverse events for all biological therapies were upper respiratory tract and nasopharyngeal infections. The rates of these infections were comparable to placebo and did not increase with extended courses of the treatment.

Although they will not protect against COVID-19, as a matter of routine, we encourage all patients on biologic medications to receive their annual influenza vaccination and remain up to date with other vaccines.

The risk of becoming infected with COVID-19 in Australia is low to moderate, however this may change in the future. For the most up to date information please visit the Department of Health website. www.health.gov.au

Who is at risk of contracting COVID-19?

If you have travelled overseas or have had close contact with someone that has a confirmed case of COVID-19 (including in the 24 hours before their symptoms started).

- 'Close contact' is typically defined as being face to face with a person who is a confirmed case for at least 15 minutes, or being in the same closed space for at least 2 hours.
- If you had less contact than that, there is a much smaller risk of your getting infected with the coronavirus that causes COVID-19. However, as a precaution, you must still monitor your health for 14 days after the contact.

<https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/coronavirus-covid-19-symptoms-and-how-the-virus-spreads-faqs>

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

The symptoms of the virus are similar to those of a common cold or flu. They can include fever, sore throat, cough, breathing difficulties (shortness of breath) and fatigue. They can be mild, moderate or severe in nature. People over the age of 65 or with an underlying medical condition like heart disease, hypertension, lung disease, diabetes or liver disease may be at higher risk of developing complications from the infection.

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. Alternatively, you can contact your GP or the National Coronavirus Helpline on 1800 020 080.

Should I stop taking my biologic or trial medication?

Currently, 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 which may increase the risk of complications if you are infected with the coronavirus.

If you have **suspected or confirmed COVID-19** infection you should withhold your medication and contact your biologics nurse or trial coordinator. This is consistent with established treatment guidelines which recommend people should not take medications that target the immune system if they have active infections. Medication should not be recommenced until the infection has resolved or infection has been ruled out. For patients who have had close contact with a person that has been diagnosed with COVID-19, withhold taking medication until confirmation of a negative result has been confirmed. Patients who have come in close contact with a suspected or confirmed case should self-isolate for 14 days as per guidelines outlined by the government. Patients cannot be cleared to recommence therapy until 14 days after commencing self-isolation.

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

Should I self-isolate as a precaution?

Self-isolation is **only** applicable for people that have travelled overseas and are recently returned, if you have tested positive for COVID-19, or you have come in close contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19. This advice may change over time.

Self-isolation involves staying indoors and avoiding further contact with people until you are sure you do not have the COVID-19 infection. If you are waiting for a COVID-19 result, then you must self-isolate and your result is negative (clear).

Is it OK to travel overseas?

The current advice from the Australian government is that all overseas travel should be deferred until further notice. For the most up to date information on travel please visit the Smart Traveller website. <https://www.smarttraveller.gov.au/COVID-19-australian-travellers>

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

- Wash your hands often with soap and running water, for at least 20 seconds, particularly after touching objects and surfaces. Dry with paper towel or hand dryer. If you use topical steroids or creams, please ensure that you wash your hands thoroughly prior to application.
- 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. Discard the tissue immediately after use. If you don't have a tissue cough or sneeze into your upper sleeve or flexed elbow.
- Stay at home if you feel sick/unwell.
- Phone your biologics nurse or trial coordinator for instructions regarding biologic or trial medication if you do become unwell
- Continue healthy habits: exercise, drink water, get plenty of sleep.
- Wearing a face mask is not necessary if you are well.
- Practice good social-distancing techniques. This includes standing at least a metre and a half from the person standing next to you, stop shaking hands, kissing or hugging as a greeting, and avoid crowds.
- For cleaning around the house, any usual household detergent should be effective at killing the virus.

If you are feeling well

Even if you are feeling well, you should practice good social distancing and hand hygiene techniques. Avoid crowds and as much as possible try to avoid situations where you may be exposed. Where possible, you may be given the option to switch your onsite medical appointment to a telehealth consultation. For up to date information on COVID-19 you can follow the link visit. www.health.gov.au

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.

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This factsheet was developed by Prof Peter Foley and A/Prof Chris Baker for the COVID-19 Team, Skin Health Institute and St Vincents Hospital Melbourne.
