

COVID 19 Advice: Irish Society for Rheumatology March 18 2020

We understand that rheumatology patients on immunosuppressives (biologics, steroids, drugs such as methotrexate) are feeling particularly vulnerable and anxious due to the novel Coronavirus disease Covid-19.

What we know so far is:

1. The most effective thing that you can do now to protect yourself is to prevent the spread of infection for yourself and others by following the advice on www.hse.ie
- Wash your hands very regularly for at least 20 seconds using soap and water. Dry hands thoroughly afterwards.
 - Avoid touching your face, especially eyes and mouth
 - Cough or sneeze only into an elbow or tissue paper and tissue paper should be discarded safely.
 - Wear a mask only when you are ill; if you have no symptoms it is not necessary to wear a mask.
 - Practice sensible social distancing of 1-2m especially from people who appear to be ill, e.g. coughing or sneezing.
 - Don't shake hands, and avoid hugs.
 - Avoid busy public transport and large groups of people.
 - If you are in a high risk group you should be socially isolating (cocooning) as much as is possible
2. Most patients will have a mild illness and recover but if we all take the actions listed above we will protect those who will develop severe illness if infected.
 3. The mortality is 1-2% and high risk groups for severe disease have been identified as age over 70, chronic heart and lung disease, diabetes and active cancer.
 4. The data from studies of the outbreak that identified these risk factors did not identify immunosuppressive treatments prescribed in rheumatology patients as a high risk factor for mortality. However patients on immunosuppressives have a reasonable cause for concern as this is an infectious disease and we are monitoring data and international guidelines on the disease in order to best advise our patients.
 5. Our advice is to not stop steroids suddenly or you may become very unwell.
 6. At present there is no known benefit to stopping your immunosuppressive rheumatology medication but if you have stable disease you should discuss with your rheumatologist whether the dose of the immunosuppressive medication can be safely reduced during this pandemic.

7. The Covid-19 pandemic may last several months so if you reduce or stop your medicine you will be more likely to have a flare during this period and need to restart your treatment or have to take more intensive treatment with steroids.
8. If you are on immunosuppressives and have other high risk factors for COVID-19 or have had a history of recurrent or opportunistic infections while on immunosuppressive therapy you are high risk and should socially isolate (cocoon) to protect yourself.
9. If you have symptoms of a viral infection - cough, shortness of breath, breathing difficulties, fever (high temperature) – continue steroids but hold your other immunosuppressives and seek advice with your GP or rheumatologist or consult the HSE website – **do not stop steroids suddenly without medical advice**