

Dear Families

We are writing to give you the following advice concerning the Coronavirus (COVID-19). The situation is changing all the time and we advise you to monitor for the latest government advice at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/topical-events/coronavirus-covid-19-uk-government-response> This advice is formulated by the Paediatric Infectious Diseases advisory group and Paediatric Rheumatologists.

### **What is COVID-19?**

Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that can cause anything from a common cold to severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS). COVID-19 is probably, overall, more at the cold and flu-like end of the spectrum of these infections. To date about 80% (80 in 100) of patients recover completely with no treatment. COVID-19 appears to affect children and adults differently. Data from China and Italy currently seem to show that the infection is milder in children than in adults although we do not yet understand exactly why this is the case. Certainly older people tend to have more other underlying illnesses than children which may play a part. In what we know so far, there are not a large number of deaths in children in China or Italy, even in immunosuppressed children or teenagers who we would expect to be more at risk.

### **Is it worse than influenza?**

Every year the WHO estimates about 3-5 million severe cases of influenza worldwide with 250,000 – 650,000 deaths. This would suggest that the risk from coronavirus is similar to that of season flu for most people.

### **How is COVID-19 spread?**

The disease can spread from person to person through small droplets from the nose or mouth which are spread when a person with COVID-19 coughs or exhales. These droplets land on objects and surfaces around the person. Other people then catch COVID-19 by touching these objects or surfaces, then touching their eyes, nose or mouth. People can also catch COVID-19 if they breathe in droplets from a person with COVID-19 who coughs out or exhales droplets.

### **How do we reduce the chance of infection and transmission ?**

Since it is spread by droplets, good hand hygiene is the top priority in preventing transmission of COVID-19, like most respiratory viruses. When out and about, alcohol-based hand-gel can be used to sanitise your hands. Washing your hands, thoroughly and frequently, with soap and water throughout the day will also help reduce the chance of infection. <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/best-way-to-wash-your-hands/>

### **Should we be wearing masks?**

Masks are generally not effective, most people do not have appropriate training for a good fit, they need replacing regularly and there is probably greater risk of contaminating your face from your hands adjusting a mask than the benefit from wearing one. Some countries do recommend a mask if a person definitely has coronavirus to help reduce spread, this is

not the case in the UK at the moment. The exception is a healthcare setting when you are given a mask, shown how to wear it and it is disposed of appropriately.

**Is my child / young person specifically at risk as they are on immunosuppressant medication for their rheumatological condition?**

Being on some medications, particularly steroids and /or biologics (such as etanercept / adalimumab / tocilizumab / abatacept / infliximab / rituximab) does cause a greater amount of immunosuppression and therefore may increase risk, although the greatest risk actually comes from being exposed to the virus, which is why the hygiene measures are so important. Many patients are on methotrexate. Whilst this does not cause as much immunosuppression, this advice would also apply to them.

**Should my child / young person stop taking the medications?**

No. Current advice is to continue taking all medications as prescribed including steroids. Stopping may cause a flare of disease requiring more intensive treatment. Contact us if your child is currently on steroids for possible dose adjustment. If they become unwell with a fever, then they should miss doses of their medication (except steroids) until their temperature has gone away. If they have symptoms of the novel Coronavirus, follow the advice on the NHS website <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/> or phone 111.

If you are already taking NSAIDs (Ibuprofen, naproxen, piroxicam) you are safe to continue using them. However, there are emerging thoughts that NSAIDs may have an adverse effect on patients who develop the virus and we would therefore suggest switching from the NSAID to paracetamol if your child develops symptoms of the virus.

If your child is on etanercept, they should have a monitoring blood test every 6 months. If your child is on methotrexate or any other biologic drug (such as adalimumab, anakinra or tocilizumab) via subcutaneous injection, they should have a blood test every 8 weeks during this time.

**Should my child / young person go to school? Should we be self-isolating until this is over?**

As of 16 March, the Government advice is that all children and adults in the UK avoid all non-essential contact with people, working from home if possible and avoiding public spaces. Subsequent advice today states that all people aged 0-69, who have an underlying health condition and are instructed to get a flu jab each year should not be in large social gatherings. Therefore according to this advice, even though currently many schools are staying open, children who are on immunosuppressive treatment should not be in large social gatherings, and for children this could be interpreted to include school. Government advice is changing almost daily, therefore recommendations may change. On a positive note, COVID-19 disease in children is reported to be mild, even in those who are immunosuppressed.

Your child may attend required medical appointments including scans and blood tests.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-social-distancing-and-for-vulnerable-people/guidance-on-social-distancing-for-everyone-in-the-uk-and-protecting-older-people-and-vulnerable-adults>

### **What about my other children? Should they stay off school?**

We appreciate how difficult this is for you as a family, but at this point that is for you and your family to decide in consultation with your child's school, taking into account each sibling's individual medical situation.

### **I think I have been in contact with someone with COVID-19, what do I do?**

If you believe you have been in contact with someone tested positive or symptomatic from a known outbreak area, first of all check the website

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-the-public> or contact NHS111 / NHS 24 for the latest advice.

If you have been told to isolate by NHS 111 / NHS 24 or you are symptomatic and NHS 111 / NHS 24 have given advice, you should also contact your local paediatric rheumatology team to see if they need to provide input.

### **I think I or my child has COVID-19 - can I go to my paediatric rheumatologist appointment?**

Call NHS 111 / NHS 24 and follow their advice. Contact us by phone or email to update us and for any input. Do not attend without agreement from the centre.

### **Keep up to date**

If the number of cases of COVID-19 continues to rise in the UK then this advice may change and you should follow the general advice given by the Government or look on the NHS website. <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>

This website <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/travel-advice-novel-coronavirus> gives the current situation of the outbreak in the UK and abroad and provides specific advice for those travelling to and from affected countries.

If it would be helpful to see the general advice in another language, please use this link: <http://www.printo.it/pediatric-rheumatology> and click on the flag of your country.

At the moment, we plan to contact you by phone at the time of your child's out-patient appointment to discuss your child's current situation and symptoms in order to try to avoid the need for you to come to the hospital. Please be available to take the call for half an hour before and after the appointment time, to have all their medication ready by you, and to weigh the child in kg if possible before the appointment.

It may, however, be necessary to examine your child, in which case you will be given an appointment to come to clinic. We will try to combine this with an appointment with the physiotherapist or occupational therapist if needed, so do not attend for any previously

arranged therapy appointments. Please continue any exercises that you have already been given. We hope that in the near future, we will be able to offer video-call consultations. It is likely that the situation will change frequently so please be patient.

We are mindful of the impact that all of this may have on your and your child's mental health. There is excellent advice from Mind at:

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/coronavirus-and-your-wellbeing/>

Yours sincerely

The Paediatric Rheumatology Team at Birmingham Women's and Children's Hospital.