

COVID-19 – Information for Transplant Patients

What is COVID-19?

Coronaviruses make up a large family of viruses that circulate in both humans and other animals. Human coronaviruses are common and are usually associated with mild illness, similar to the common cold, and can spread easily between people. Symptoms of COVID-19 may include:

- Fever
- Cough
- Difficulty breathing including shortness of breath
- Other flu like symptoms including body aches and diarrhea
- Some transplant patients may develop pneumonia

What is the treatment for COVID-19?

Treating severe illness caused by COVID-19 is difficult and success varies greatly. The most effective treatment for COVID-19 is prevention. There are now four vaccines approved in Canada against the virus but none have been tested in the transplant population.

Are transplant recipients at higher risk for COVID-19?

There is no definitive information on whether COVID-19 infection will be more severe in transplant recipients. Other viruses often cause more severe disease in people whose immune systems are low, such as transplant recipients. It is very important to protect yourself from exposure to COVID-19.

COVID-19 is usually spread through close, direct contact with someone who has the virus. The virus is thought to be more easily spread when someone has symptoms but this is not always the case. Some people may be asymptomatic, they have the virus but have no symptoms. You should wear a mask when going out in public, particularly when a safe physical distance of 2 meters cannot be guaranteed.

It is also possible to get the virus by touching a surface that has been touched by someone with the virus. Proper hand washing as well as disinfection high-touch surfaces such as door handle and tabletops will help lower the risk of spreading the virus.

What can I do to protect myself from COVID-19?

The best treatment for COVID-19 is prevention – avoid situations that put you at risk of exposure. You do not need to stay in isolation. It is ok to be out in public as public health restrictions allow. Avoid unnecessary outings and follow the guidance of local health officials. It is also very important that everyone you are in close contact with (e.g. those in your household) follow public health guidelines and avoid exposure to COVID-19. If they are exposed, you are exposed.

1. Wash your hands often.
 - Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds especially after you have been in a public place, or after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing.
 - If soap and water are not readily available, use a hand sanitizer that contains at least 70% alcohol. Cover all surfaces of your hands and rub them together until they feel dry.
 - Carry hand sanitizer with you whenever you go out. It is also handy to keep some in your vehicle.
 - Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
2. Be aware of physical distancing.
 - Ensure a distance of 2 metres (6 feet) is between yourself and other people.
 - If you live with people who continue to work outside the home, try to maintain physical space even in your home.
 - Stay away from anyone who is sick or may have been exposed to COVID-19.
 - Avoid visitors in your home if possible. Visitors should wear a mask and wash their hands often if they visit you.

3. Stay home as much as possible.
 - Avoid any unnecessary travel
 - Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
 - If you do need to go out, avoid public transportation.
4. Stay active.
 - Maintain fitness – keep up with your exercise program.
 - If you do go outside for exercise (walk, run, bike, etc.):
 - Go out at times when it is less busy (e.g. early morning).
 - Stay close to home.
 - Avoid crowded areas.

Should I wear a mask?

You should wear a mask when you are in places where it is difficult to physically distance from others. There is no clear evidence that wearing a mask will help protect you from COVID-19, but it will protect those around you.

- Wash your hands with soap and water or use an alcohol-based sanitizer before putting the mask on and after taking it off.
- The mask should cover both your mouth and nose and have no gaps between the mask and your face. It is not necessary to wear an N-95 mask.
- Do not touch the front of the mask while you wear it.
- When a mask becomes damp or dirty, replace it with a new mask.
- Do not reuse a single-use mask. Throw your mask away after you remove it.
- Cloth masks should be washed after each use.

What can I do to limit the spread of COVID-19 and protect others?

- Self-isolate (stay home) if you are sick, except to get medical care. Public Health Ontario has provided a fact sheet on how to self-isolate.
- Self-isolate for 14 days if you have had recent travel anywhere including by train, plane or bus, been in large gatherings (20 or more people) or had close contact to anyone who has or may have COVID-19.
- When you cough or sneeze use the inside of your elbow or cover your mouth and nose with a tissue.
- Use proper handwashing either with soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
- If you are sick, wear a facemask when you are around other people. If you go to any healthcare facility (doctor's office or your local hospital) you should also wear a mask.
- Clean AND disinfect high-touch surfaces frequently. This includes tables, doorknobs, light switches, countertops, handles, desks, phones, keyboards, toilets, faucets, and sinks.
- If surfaces are dirty, clean them. Use detergent or soap and water prior to disinfection.

What do I do if I'm concerned I have COVID-19?

- If you think that you have been exposed to COVID-19, or have had close contact with anyone who has or may have COVID-19, you are at an increased risk for having the virus. You should be tested for COVID-19 at a local screening centre. Get tested immediately – if you have COVID-19, early treatment is extremely important.
- Symptoms of COVID-19 include cough, fever, sniffles, headache or new diarrhea. These symptoms in transplant patient can also be a sign of other complications. If you have concerns, please contact your transplant team or clinic. Contact numbers are available in your post-operative teaching binder.
- If you are feeling short of breath and have difficulty breathing, go to your local Emergency Department. Wear a mask. Please page the transplant physician on-call on your way to the hospital.
- If you have any concerns that you may have COVID-19, with or without symptoms, go to a local screening centre to be tested.
- Continue to take your medication and have your blood drawn as normal.