

NZSG Advice for Patients with Autoimmune Hepatitis during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Most patients with autoimmune hepatitis need to take immunosuppressant drugs to avoid a flare of their disease. People who are on immunosuppressant drugs (and especially those >60 years old) are considered more likely to acquire COVID-19. It is too early to know if immunosuppressed people are at increased risk of severe COVID-19.

The current recommendations from the NZ Government are that people with compromised immunity stay at home as much as they can (www.covid19.govt.nz). This means for all NZ COVID Alert Levels 2 and above:

- Stay at home and minimise contact with other people including family and friends
- Ask others to help with shopping etc.
- Personal hygiene: wash your hands frequently and avoid touching your face

Top tips for patients with autoimmune hepatitis

1. Clinic Appointments:

- Hospitals are undergoing significant reorganisation and changes to delivery of care, but will be doing everything possible to keep you safe and well during the pandemic.
- **All** clinics at this stage will be done via telephone and you will be contacted regarding this if you have an upcoming appointment.

2. Medications: **DO NOT STOP** your medications. This is because:

- We do not know for certain that these increase your risk of COVID-19 infection or severe disease.
- The risks of stopping medications include risk of disease flares and hospitalisation. This will put you at higher risk than continuing your medications.
- TIP: Ensure you have a good supply of medication to self-isolate.

3. General Health Protective Measures:

- Influenza (Flu) vaccine: arrange to receive this via your GP.
- Work from home, avoid non-essential travel & contact with people who are unwell.
- Quit smoking as this increases the risk and severity of COVID-19 infection.
- Healthy diet (fruit & vegetables), regular exercise and sleep help your immune system.

4. COVID-19 Symptoms:

- If you develop a cough, fever, sore throat or flu-like symptoms **you should follow the government's recommendations about self-isolation and household quarantine. Please contact your GP or Healthline on 0800 358 5453 for advice about testing if you have symptoms. For a medical emergency dial 111. Do not turn up to your GP practice unannounced.**

- If you do become infected with COVID-19 please ensure that your treating doctor knows that you are taking immunosuppressant medications

Frequently Asked Questions

Q1. Am I immunosuppressed?

Any person on any of the following medications is considered to be immunosuppressed and should be following appropriate guidance. If you are taking more than one of these drugs, or if you also have liver cirrhosis, then you are likely to be more significantly immunosuppressed.

- Prednisone
- Azathioprine / 6-mercaptopurine / thioguanine
- Mycophenolate
- Tacrolimus
- Ciclosporin

Q2. Are there additional “high risk” things I should consider?

Yes, if you also fulfil any other of the following criteria we would recommend complete self-isolation: age >60, diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure, heart disease, liver decompensation (e.g. ascites or encephalopathy from cirrhosis).

Q3. If I am self-isolating and unable to work do I require a medical certificate?

If you require evidence to support the fact that you have medical issues requiring you to self-isolate please get in touch with your GP.

Q5. What about my blood tests?

If your autoimmune hepatitis was diagnosed recently, medications have been changed, or we have had recent concerns about your health, regular blood tests will continue to be important to monitor your disease. If your autoimmune hepatitis has been stable for a long time, routine blood tests may be delayed to every 3 months -please ask your gastroenterology team for advice if you are not sure. If blood tests are required, speak to your local laboratory to ensure they are open, and try to visit at a quiet time to limit your exposure.

Q6. I work in an “essential service” what should I do?

Some people with autoimmune hepatitis will work in essential services which need to continue during the COVID-19 pandemic. If you are on immunosuppressant medication we would support working from home and you should discuss this with your manager. If this is not possible then avoid contact with employees and the public, clean down work stations, and maintain meticulous personal hygiene.

Ministry of health – www.covid19.govt.nz

American association for the study of liver diseases- [AASLD advice for providers](https://aasld.org/covid-19-advice-for-providers/)

British Society of Gastroenterology <https://www.bsg.org.uk/covid-19-advice/bsg-and-basl-covid-19-advice-for-healthcare-professionals-in-gastroenterology-and-hepatology/>