WDHB Department of Gastroenterology.

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You are receiving this letter/email because you have a chronic medical condition and are taking medications which affect your immune system.

Information on Covid-19 for patients taking immune suppression medication are recommended to undertake Level 4 isolation..

The situation regarding COVID-19 is rapidly evolving and this advice may change subject to current ministry of health guidance. Please check for updates of information from the World Health Organisation, Auckland Regional Health and the Ministry of Health at: <https://www.waitematadhb.govt.nz/patients-visitors/covid-19-information/>

What is Covid-19?

Corona Virus Disease 19 is a new coronavirus that causes lung and airway infections. It is sometimes called SARS-CoV-2. The virus originated in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China but cases have now been confirmed in all across the world, including now in New Zealand.

What are the symptoms?

Typical symptoms of novel coronavirus include fever (at least 38 degrees Celsius), coughing, tightness of the chest and shortness of breath. The current evidence is that most cases appear to be mild. The symptoms are similar to other viral illnesses such as the common cold and flu. Some patients may present with symptoms of gut upset.

Covid-19 alert level in New Zealand.

Guidance on the Covid-19 alert level in New Zealand and what that means for the general public can be found at <https://covid19.govt.nz/government-actions/covid-19-alert-system/#new-zealand-covid-19-alert-levels>

What are immunosuppressive drugs?

Medications that you take to keep your disease under control and keep you well that include:

Azathioprine (Imuran/Azimun), 6-mercaptopurine (Puri-Nethol), methotrexate, thioguanine (Lanvis), mycophenolate (CellCept), cyclosporine (Neoral), tacrolimus, sirolimus (Rapamune), and the biological agents: infliximab (Remicade) and adalimumab (Humira).

If am on an immunosuppressive drug am I at more risk of Covid-19?

* People taking immunosuppressants are **not** at increased risk of *catching* novel coronavirus.
* Early international data indicates that immunosuppression does **not** increase your risks of COVID-19 complications.
* People over the age of 70 and with chronic health conditions such as diabetes, heart conditions and respiratory illness are at higher risk of complications such as intensive care admission or even death.
* Those who smoke or are taking non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs have also been found to be at increased risk

Should I stop taking my immunosuppression treatment?

* NO - unless specifically advised by your medical team, you should **continue** with your immunosuppressive treatment.
* This treatment does not increase the risk of being infected with coronavirus. You should take precautions to avoid infection through good personal hygiene and avoiding unnecessary close contact with people who are unwell, as discussed above
* If you stop taking your immunosuppressive medicine, you may have a flare which will increase your risk of complications if infected with coronavirus.
* If you still have concerns about continuing your medication, you should speak to the medical team caring for you.
* If you are at an increased risk of infection, for example, if you’ve been in direct contact with an infected individual, have travelled to a high infectivity area, or have another serious comorbidity that increases your risk further, you should seek advice from your medical team by telephone before making any changes to your medication.

What does level 4 isolation mean in practice?

In practical terms, this means that once you reach your residence you must: ( do we need more than in practical terms?

* Stay at home
* Not go to work, school or public areas
* Not use public transport like buses, trains, tubes or taxis
* Avoid visitors to your home
* Ask friends, family members or delivery services to carry out errands for you – such as getting groceries, medications or other shopping

Should I still come to clinic?

At this stage, outpatient clinics are **cancelled**. However you can still get medical advice from your GP or your specialist teams/specialist nurse. Some departments may be able to offer a virtual clinic if you have acute problems or concerns.

Should I still attend for Infliximab infusions?  
Yes.

Do I need to stockpile my medications?

**No**, at this stage we are not anticipating shortages of prescription medications so there is no need to get a larger supply than usual. Pharmac have reassured Dr Malcolm Arnold (president of the New Zealand Society of Gastroenterology) that there is no shortage of medication and that supply lines are open and functioning.

What can I do to lower my risk?

As with all viral illnesses, there are precautions we can all take reduce the risk of catching or spreading the virus;

* Always carry tissues with you and use them to catch your cough or sneeze. Then bin the tissue, and wash your hands for at least 20 seconds with soap, or use a sanitiser gel.
* Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after using public transport. Use a sanitiser gel if soap and water are not available.
* Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands.
* Avoid close contact with people who are unwell and stay 2 metres away from everyone who is not in your household.

Who should I contact if I am worried?

If you do have specific medication concerns or symptoms you are worried about, you should speak to your GP, contact Healthline 0800 358 5453, or get in touch with your specialist or specialist nurse.

**Please do this by telephone, do not go in person to a hospital or your GP unless you have been advised to do so.**