

**Covid-19 Guidance for Rheumatology Patients**

The Covid-19 situation in the UK is changing over time and we therefore recommend that you follow the up to date advice being provided by Public Health England and the Government. There is also very useful information specifically for rheumatology patients provided by Versus Arthritis. We should all continue to reduce the risk of contracting Covid-19 by careful hand washing, social distancing and wearing face coverings when required.

**Vaccination:**

We recommend the Covid-19 vaccine for all our patients – there are no rheumatological conditions or medications that prevent you from having either of the two currently available vaccines (PfizerBioNTech or AstraZeneca). We advise that you have the vaccine as soon as you are offered it by your GP or a vaccination centre. Vaccines are not available through the rheumatology department.

There are some data to suggest that vaccination is less effective in the 6 months after receiving rituximab infusions. It is still safe to have the vaccine, and we encourage you to have it when it is offered, but it may give less protection against Covid-19. You should therefore continue to take precautions with handwashing and distancing until the majority of the population has been vaccinated. Some other medications such as methotrexate may also slightly reduce the effectiveness of the vaccine, however there is insufficient evidence to make any specific recommendations about changing or stopping medications**. We therefore advise that you continue your rheumatology medications as usual around the time of vaccination**, but be aware to continue to take precautions once vaccinated.

**Shielding and risk categories:**

Patients with rheumatic diseases that need treatment with immunosuppressants may be at higher risk of more severe disease if they become infected. However, there is now data to suggest that the increased risk from these medications may not be very high for most patients. Older age is still the most significant risk factor for more severe Covid-19 infection.

A proportion of patients on immunosuppressive medications will previously have been contacted by letter and advised to ‘**shield**’, as they are the most vulnerable group. Broadly, these are patients taking steroids (prednisolone) at a dose of 20mg or more per day for more than four weeks, those on cyclophosphamide, those on prednisolone at least 5mg daily plus another immunosuppressive medication or who are over 70, or those on two immunosuppressive agents who also have another co-morbidity (diabetes, lung disease, kidney disease, heart disease, high blood pressure or age over 70).

A larger proportion of patients will fall into the ‘**moderate risk’** category, and would only need to strictly self-isolate if there are other concerns or they have particularly high risk circumstances. These are patients whose condition is well-controlled and are on a single immunosuppressant, or a single immunosuppressant plus hydroxychloroquine or sulfasalazine, or who are well-controlled on two immunosuppressive medications (excluding prednisolone 5mg or more). We advise extra care with distancing and handwashing in this situation, and avoiding unnecessary contacts.

Patients taking sulfasalazine and/or hydroxychloroquine without other immunosuppressant medication are at **low risk** and do not need to do anything differently compared with the general population advice.

If you develop a viral infection, immunosuppressants will need to be paused, as you would usually do with any infection. As a reminder, steroids should not be stopped suddenly if you have taken more than 5mg for more than 4 weeks.

**Appointments:**

We are currently continuing most follow up reviews by telephone, and will ring you at approximately the time of your planned appointment. Where necessary, and when we think the benefits to you outweigh the potential risks, we are able to arrange face to face reviews.

**Advice:**

The best way to contact us with any specific queries is by emailing the rheumatology specialist nurses via the advice line:

r.adviceline@nhs.net

**NHS advice regarding Covid-19:**

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>

**Versus Arthritis Information:**

<https://www.versusarthritis.org/covid-19-updates/covid-19-assessing-your-risk/>

<https://www.versusarthritis.org/covid-19-updates/vaccines-for-covid-19-your-questions-answered/>

**Government Social Distancing Guidance**

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-alert-and-safe-social-distancing>

Approved by Harrogate Rheumatology Team 5 January 2021