



ACADEMY OF MEDICINE  
SINGAPORE



CHAPTER OF RHEUMATOLOGISTS  
COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS  
SINGAPORE

APRIL 2020

## ADVISORY FOR RHEUMATOLOGY PATIENTS

# GUIDANCE ON COVID-19

In view of the COVID-19 pandemic in Singapore and around the world, the Chapter of Rheumatologists, College of Physicians, Singapore, has issued a guidance, to keep patients with autoimmune diseases on immunosuppressive medications safe.

### Should you cease your medication as a precaution?

No. You **should continue** to take your medication, unless directed otherwise by your rheumatologist or treating doctor.

If you develop any symptoms of infection, you should seek urgent medical attention. It is a legal requirement for you to isolate yourself at home if you have been issued a 5-day medical certificate (MC) by your doctor for any respiratory symptoms, no matter how mild these symptoms are. Immunosuppressive medications may be paused for the duration of the infection until you feel well, and in consultation with your rheumatology service. Your rheumatologist will advise you on when to restart treatment. You must not stop your steroids abruptly. Stopping steroids abruptly may predispose you to a flare of the autoimmune disease, causing more stress to the body and further increasing the risk of contracting COVID-19 infection. It is generally safe to continue hydroxychloroquine and sulfasalazine if you are infected with COVID-19 and have only mild symptoms. If you have any questions pertaining to your rheumatology medications, please speak to your rheumatologist for advice.

## Vaccinations

If you are above the age 65, or on immunosuppressive medications, or have long term health conditions (with or without the threat of COVID-19), you should adhere to your local vaccination recommendations. If you have not had your annual influenza vaccine, it is recommended that you do so as soon as possible. You should also receive pneumococcal vaccination if you have not had this previously.

## How to keep yourself and your loved ones safe

Observing hand hygiene is critical. The general principle is to keep your hands clean by washing with soap and water, or performing alcohol hand rubs frequently, after touching any surface.

It is important to practise social distancing, as it reduces the risk of transmission and slows the spread of the virus. Do this by keeping at least 1 metre apart from other people, and minimising face-to-face interactions. Do avoid crowded places or attending any gatherings of more than 10 people. Physical greetings, such as handshakes, are discouraged. When having meals, be seated at least 1 metre apart from each other, and avoid buffet meals.

If you are above the age of 60, or have other medical conditions including diabetes, pre-existing lung disease, kidney disease, heart disease, or high blood pressure, you are in general, considered to be at higher risk for infections.

## Postponement or changes in outpatient appointments

Some of you may be advised by your rheumatology clinic to postpone your appointment to an alternative date, as deemed safe by your rheumatologist. Your routine consultation may also be replaced by telephone appointments. This is to reduce the need for face-to-face appointments and unnecessary exposure to the hospital setting.

### References

1. <https://www.moh.gov.sg/covid-19/advisories-for-various-sectors>
2. <https://www.moh.gov.sg/covid-19/faqs>
3. <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public>

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