



COVID-19: Advice for people living with Pulmonary Fibrosis

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It is important to note that this is a developing situation, and advice may change over time.

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that affect the lungs and airways and can make people sick. This new coronavirus outbreak which originated in Hubei Province, China, in late 2019 is called COVID-19. The high rates of transmission have led to COVID-19 being classified by the World Health Organization as a pandemic.

How does it spread?

COVID-19 spreads from person to person through droplet transmission. You can become infected if:

- You have direct close contact with an infected person while they are contagious
- You have close contact with an infected person who coughs or sneezes
- You touch an object, for example a door handle, or surface contaminated from a cough or sneeze from a person with COVID-19 and touch your eyes, nose or mouth.

Some people who are infected with COVID-19 may not get sick at all, some will experience mild symptoms and recover easily, and others may become very ill, very quickly. From previous experience with coronaviruses, the people most at risk of serious infection include those who are immunocompromised, live with chronic medical conditions and older people.

Importantly, people living with a respiratory disease such as Pulmonary Fibrosis (PF) are at higher risk of serious infection due to COVID-19. This is because of the lung scarring already present from the fibrosis, and also due to the medications patients with PF may be taking. Some of these medications (such as prednisone and mycophenolate mofetil) lower the immune system making it more difficult for the body to fight infections.

What should I do if I think I have COVID-19?

Do not try to self-diagnose. It is impossible to know if your symptoms are due to COVID-19. Respiratory symptoms mask each other and it may be very difficult to tell if someone living with PF has COVID-19. Symptoms to look out for include fever, sore throat, increasing cough and shortness of breath.

If you are concerned, telephone your GP or the National Coronavirus Helpline on 1800 020 080 for advice. If you make an appointment to see your GP, remember to call ahead before you go and follow their directions to reduce the risk of potentially spreading COVID-19. If your doctor is concerned, they will organise a test for COVID-19. The results of this test may not be available for several days. During that time, you will need to self-isolate.

What can I do to reduce my risk?



Good hand hygiene

- Wash hands frequently with soap and warm water for 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitiser.
- Avoid touching your face, especially your eyes, nose and mouth.



Cough and sneeze etiquette

- Cover your mouth and nose with a flexed elbow or tissue when you cough and sneeze.
- If you use a tissue, dispose of it in a bin and then wash your hands.
- Encourage others around you to follow good cough and sneeze etiquette.



General cleaning

- Clean frequently touched surfaces regularly with soap and water and then disinfect. Frequently touched surfaces include doorknobs, light switches, phones, taps and sinks, toilets, countertops, tables, desks and keyboards.
- Wash your hands with soap and water after cleaning and disinfecting.

Cleaning medical equipment

- Ensure equipment that touches your face is kept clean.
- For example, oxygen prongs should not touch any other surface (replace them if they do). If you must go out, try to avoid placing oxygen equipment on other surfaces, and wipe down the outside of oxygen equipment regularly with an alcohol based cleaner, for example, an antibacterial wipe.
- Check your manufacturer's guidelines for cleaning procedures.

Social distancing

People with COVID-19 can be infectious for some time before they develop any symptoms. Therefore, it is not enough to simply avoid people who are unwell. This is why social distancing is necessary. Social distancing refers to creating physical space between yourself and others. It is currently recommended that people maintain a distance of at least 1.5 metres from each other.

- Stay at home unless absolutely necessary.
- If you must go out, practice social distancing by staying 1.5 metres away from other people.
- Avoid all contact with people who are unwell.

Connect with your treating healthcare team

For advice specific to you and your situation, speak to your treating healthcare team. Your respiratory specialist or other healthcare team members may be working on the frontline of the COVID-19 response and may be more difficult to reach. If this is the case, contact your GP for advice.

In many cases, it is best to try and avoid attending appointments in person to reduce the risk of exposure to the virus. Some tests such as lung function tests will not be performed during the COVID-19 pandemic due to risks of spreading infection. Your treating healthcare team may be able to contact you via telephone or videocall consultation services (telehealth). Contact your treating centre to find out what is available to you.

Maintain management of your health

Please continue with your usual medications and management unless otherwise advised by your treating healthcare team. Ensure you have current prescriptions for your regular medications on hand. If you require oxygen cylinders, contact your supplier, ask them to inform you of their supply, and create a plan to continue to deliver oxygen to you during this time.

Organise with your treating healthcare team to have your influenza and pneumonia vaccinations updated. Although the flu vaccination will not protect against COVID-19, it will help reduce your risk of seasonal influenza.

Facemasks

Facemasks are not required unless you are sick. Wearing a facemask can make breathing more difficult for people living with a lung disease. Please seek advice from your treating healthcare team before using a mask as a preventative measure.

Exercise

Keep as active as possible. There may be exercises you can do at home to maintain your strength and fitness. Most pulmonary rehabilitation classes have now been suspended. Consider contacting your pulmonary rehabilitation centre about home-based options.



Clinical Trials

If you are participating in a clinical trial, the safety of participants will be considered first. Some trials will be suspended, whilst others may continue in a modified form, for example, with remote visits so that you do not have to attend a hospital). The trial team will make all possible efforts to make sure you still have access to trial medications – please contact your trial team for further details. As always, you may suspend your participation or withdraw from a clinical trial at any time.

Staying safe in your home

Social distancing and self-isolation are the most effective ways to stop the spread of the virus. Stay at home as much as possible.

Family members and caregivers are often an integral support to people living with PF and may help with daily tasks. Only household members and carers who are essential in providing care for you should be in your living space at this time.

Anyone living in your home with you should take extra care to avoid bringing COVID-19 into the home by not leaving the house unless performing an essential task and observing social distancing and hygiene measures.

If members of your household are leaving the house to perform essential activities such as shopping for groceries, you should consider social distancing at home. This can be done by staying in a different room from them or being separated as much as possible; using a separate bathroom, if available and avoiding shared or communal areas. Care should be taken to follow the general cleaning procedures of frequently touched surfaces if household members are still needing to leave the house.

Delay all other non-essential household errands which require leaving your home or involve having additional people enter your home. Many life administration matters can be taken care of remotely over the phone or by computer. Ask a family member, caregiver or friend for help if you are unsure of how to approach this.

It would be preferable if members of your household did not have to leave the house at all.

Accessing essential supplies

You may wish to consider using one of the grocery or pharmacy home delivery services available in your area. Family members and friends may also wish to support you at this time, by helping to ensure you have access to your medications and other necessary supplies. It is important to reach out and ask for help rather than risk going into public places.

Items provided by people who do not live with you should be left at your door to minimise physical contact. When putting items like groceries away, avoid touching your face and wash your hands with soap and water immediately afterwards. You may also consider wiping down objects coming into your home with household disinfectant or an alcohol based cleaner before they come inside, and then immediately wash your hands with soap and water.

Carers

Carers are essential visitors to your home. Upon arrival, they should practice good hand hygiene by washing their hands with soap and water or use alcohol-based gel at the front door. Once the essential visitor has finished their tasks, they should clean all surfaces they may have touched with soap and water then disinfect those surfaces. Carers visiting the home should avoid touching surfaces in the home unnecessarily.

If a member of the household becomes unwell

If any household member suspects they may be unwell, where possible, it's recommended they live elsewhere for the duration of their illness.

Transport

Only travel if absolutely necessary and avoid public transport wherever possible. If you must use public transport, practice social distancing and hygiene measures as described above.



Wellbeing

It's normal to have feelings of fear, anxiousness, anger, frustration and even denial. Here are some tips to help with your overall wellness:

- Avoid watching the 24-hour news cycle and be conscious about where your information comes from. Only look at reliable sources that are updated regularly, such as the Australian Government Department of Health website.
- Keep in touch with friends and family – in stressful times we cope better with support from those close to us. You may not be able to see them in person but try to stay connected through regular telephone and video calls.
- Spend time doing things you enjoy, such as reading, cooking, listening to the radio or watching TV.
- Try to stick to your normal routine as much as possible, even when spending time at home.
- Eat healthy and nourishing food.
- Stay active. If you are not sure how to go about this, speak with your treating healthcare team.
- Try to maintain a regular sleeping pattern. If you are not getting enough sleep, it can affect your immune system, meaning you could be more susceptible to becoming unwell.
- Reach out for help if you need it. For example, if you are feeling overwhelmed or anxious. Details for valuable services such as Lung Foundation Australia's Information and Support Centre and BeyondBlue or Lifeline are available below.

Connecting with family and friends

Keep in touch with friends and family. In stressful times we cope better with support from those close to us. Think about other ways to socialise such as telephone, videocalls, email and social media. Make a plan with family and friends to connect on different days so interactions with others are spaced out across the week.

Be creative when connecting with others, for example, you can watch television shows at the same time as friends and have a phone conversation about it afterwards. You may not be able to see them in person, but you can stay connected. If you are feeling socially isolated, don't wait for someone to contact you, call a friend or a family member and discuss how you are feeling.

Useful resources

- Lung Foundation Australia's Information and Support Centre **1800 654 301** or email enquiries@lungfoundation.com.au.
- Lung Foundation Australia's COVID-19 online information and resources <https://lungfoundation.com.au/patients-carers/lung-health/coronavirus-disease-covid-19/what-you-need-to-know/>.
- Department of Health COVID-19 resources <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/collections/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-resources>.

Useful phone numbers

- National Coronavirus Helpline **1800 020 080**, which provides 24-hour information on coronavirus.
- Healthdirect Helpline **1800 022 222**, which provides 24-hour non-urgent assistance for your health concerns.
- Beyond Blue **1300 224 636**, which provides 24-hour support to listen to how you are feeling, offer information and advice so you can seek further support.
- Lifeline **13 11 14**, which provides 24-hour crisis telephone counselling.