

Cancer patients and COVID-19: what should I know? 13 March 2020

DISCLAIMER Information regarding this year's coronavirus pandemic changes on a daily basis. By the time you read this, there may be updated information. Please always refer to government websites for up to date information and recommendations.

Does my cancer or cancer therapy make me more at risk of COVID-19?

Many cancers suppress the immune system themselves. Cancer radiotherapy, chemotherapy and immunotherapy treatments also often deplete the white blood cells and antibodies that we need to fight infection.

Your immune defence may be low if you have any of the following:

1. Low white blood cell count (either lymphocytes or neutrophils)
2. Low immunoglobulin (healthy antibody) level
3. You have no spleen due to surgery or radiation
4. Your treatment includes/included chemotherapy, radiotherapy, targeted biological agents, steroids, immunosuppressive therapies.

You can discuss your risk with your treating specialist and make a plan to prevent infection.

Is my suppressed immune system permanently disabled?

Not necessarily. For many of these treatments once completed the immune system then recovers but it can take 6-12 months.

It is important to remember however that even when your blood cell counts return to normal, the function and vitality of your immune system may still be compromised. It can take a very long time to get over some very immune suppressive cancer therapies such as a bone marrow transplant or a very prolonged period on steroids.

How do I avoid catching COVID-19?

According to the World Health Organisation: All people should

1. Wash your hands frequently with alcohol based hand rub or soap and water.
2. Maintain Social Distancing – stay 1-3m away from anyone who is coughing or sneezing. Avoid crowds and non-essential travel.
3. Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth
4. Practice Respiratory Hygiene
5. 'Cover your cough' by turning away from others and coughing into your elbow or a tissue rather than your hand
6. Dispose of tissues carefully and wash your hands after coughing, sneezing or any other body fluid clean-up
7. Stay informed regarding the virus. Follow the directions of your local health authority

Should I wear a mask?

Only out in public if you yourself have, or are suspected of having the virus, or if you are directly caring for a proven or suspected case. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) there is no need for healthy people to wear face masks.

Should I cancel travel?

(March 13) It is now recommended that all Australians avoid non essential travel regardless of age, destination or health.

I think I might have coronavirus – what should I do?

If you have are unwell (cough, fever, shortness of breath), have travelled internationally or have been in close contact with a proven COVID-19 case, call the hotline on 1800675398 for advice on testing and self-isolation.