

Covid-19 and Lung Cancer



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What is COVID-19 and how is it picked up?

Covid-19 is a virus that is usually picked up by someone breathing in droplets spread by an infected person. This can be through sneezing or coughing or speaking in close proximity. Infection can also be picked up from droplets that land on surfaces which can then be transferred from the hands to the nose, mouth or eyes.

Why is Covid-19 of concern to lung cancer patients?

Some people show no symptoms of Covid-19, others have mild or more serious infections which they recover from after a couple of weeks. The infection also has the potential to cause more chronic health concerns, including lung damage and chronic immune system problems. Sadly people can die from Covid-19.

The risk of Covid-19 varies across different cancers. Patients most at risk include those with a weakened immune system (e.g. following recent cancer treatment), those who are older, certain cancers that affect the immune system and those with underlying conditions, such as diabetes, heart disease and breathing problems.

Unfortunately lung cancer weakens the lungs and this means people with lung cancer are at an increased risk of becoming seriously ill if they develop Covid-19. Many lung cancer patients have underlying breathing problems so this too increases their risk of becoming very sick. Lung cancer patients who are undergoing or have recently completed radiotherapy treatment are considered high risk and should discuss this with their medical team.

How can I reduce my risk of infection?

Currently countries all around the world have different levels of advice for their populations however there are some key steps we can all take to reduce our risk of Covid-19. With droplets being the major route of infection, isolation from others who might have the illness is the most powerful single method to stop yourself developing an infection. Other ways to stay safe are;

- **Wear a face covering**
Always follow the latest official advice on face coverings.
- **Limit contact with other people**
And when in company, keep 6ft / 2m distance from other people.
- **Wash your hands regularly or use alcohol hand rub.**
- **Don't touch your face, mouth or eyes with unclean hands.**
- **Catch your coughs in your elbow / a tissue**
Put the tissue in the bin and wash your hands straightaway.
- **Regularly clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces.**
- **Don't share objects that touch your mouth –** for example, bottles, cups.
- **Don't shake hands.**
- **Make sure anyone in contact with you and their friends and family are also following the advice about social distancing, face coverings and hygiene.** They could be putting you at risk if they don't.
- **Follow national advice on reporting any symptoms immediately.**

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How to keep your hands clean

Soap and Water

Wet your hands with clean running water (warm or cold) and apply soap.

Lather your hands by rubbing them together with the soap.

Scrub all surfaces of your hands, including the palms, backs, fingers, between your fingers, and under your nails. Keep scrubbing for 20 seconds.

Rinse your hands under clean, running water.

Dry your hands using a clean towel or air dry them.

Alcohol-Based Hand Rub

If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol, and wash with soap and water as soon as you can.

Do **NOT** use hand sanitizer if your hands are visibly dirty.

Apply. Put enough product on hands to cover all surfaces.

Rub hands together, until hands feel dry. This should take around 20 seconds.

Note: Do not rinse or wipe off the hand sanitizer before it is dry; it may not work as well against germs.

Supervise children to avoid swallowing alcohol.

If you have or had lung cancer, you may need to take extra measures to reduce your chances of getting Covid-19. These include;

- Strictly avoid contact with someone who has symptoms of Covid-19 or has been around someone with Covid-19.
- Stay home as much as possible, limit social interactions to small groups outdoors, and always maintain strict social distancing when coming into contact with others.
- Avoid using public transport where possible.
- Keep in regular contact with others using remote technology such as phone, internet, and social media, rather than meeting in person.
- Use telephone or online services to contact your medical team or other essential services.
- Have someone refill your prescription medications and other over-the-counter medicines and supplies.
- Keep physically active and try to get regular fresh air.
- Eat a well-balanced diet, arrange for your food to be delivered to your home if possible.
- Make a joint plan with family, friends and neighbours for the support you need now, or if you become unwell.

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What should I do if I have symptoms?

Symptoms include fever (high temperature above 38°C / 100.4°F), cough, shortness of breath, or a loss or change to your sense of smell or taste.

Isolate yourself and call your medical team for advice:

- If you're having treatment or have finished treatment in the past 6 months, phone your oncology unit immediately. Any infection can be serious if your immune system is low. Your hospital team can assess if your symptoms may be related to your cancer or to Covid-19.
- If you're waiting for treatment to start or you've recovered from cancer, phone your doctor or hospital team for advice.

Don't go to a hospital, treatment clinic or a doctor's surgery without talking to a healthcare professional first.

Will I be able to have my treatment?

You should carry on with your treatment and keep taking any medication unless your doctor tells you to stop. Hospitals are working to keep cancer patients safe and give them the best possible care.

The risk from Covid-19 may mean having a phone or video consultation instead of meeting face to face, not having certain types of treatment or postponing treatment for a time. Your medical team at the hospital will let you know about any changes in your treatment plan or changes to hospital procedures.

Your medical team may advise you to isolate for two weeks before treatment, to reduce your risk of coming into contact with Covid-19. Ask them if you need to isolate before, during or after treatment, and for how long.

What if my treatment is delayed?

Covid-19 is putting extra pressure on our health services and in some countries, this means appointments and treatments are being delayed. You may feel very anxious if your treatment is changed or delayed. Try to talk to your medical team about why this is happening and what it means for you.

Some cancer treatments can affect your immune system, making you more at risk of becoming ill from Covid-19. This has led to some changes being made to hospital appointments and treatment plans in the interests of reducing the chances of patients getting an infection.

Doctors everywhere are weighing up the urgency and potential benefit of treatments with the risks of them going ahead, and how to best manage the risk of exposure to Covid-19 during hospital visits. As a result you're likely to have some telephone appointments with your medical team rather than seeing them in the hospital.

It's good to prepare for a telephone appointment as it can be difficult to remember everything you want to say. Preparing a list of questions and taking notes can be helpful as it can be difficult to remember everything they say, especially on the phone. If you don't understand something ask them to explain it to you again. This is your time so don't be afraid to ask anything you need to.

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Examples of questions you might want to ask your medical team:

- Will my cancer treatment affect my risk of becoming ill from Covid-19?
- What should I do if I, or someone I live with, gets Covid-19?
- Will my treatment continue if I have Covid-19?
- My treatment has been delayed - when can I expect to have the treatment?
- Will a delay to my treatment affect how well it will work?
- My treatment has changed, can you explain why?

I had lung cancer in the past – am I more at risk from Covid-19?

Most people's immune systems have fully recovered a few months after their treatment has ended. If your immune system has recovered, your risk will not be significantly higher than other people the same age and general health as you.

You should still follow the advice about how to protect yourself from infection.

Everyone's risk is different – it depends on your cancer type, your treatment, your age and your general health. If you're worried, the best thing to do is ask your cancer doctor or oncology nurses, who know your medical history.

Supporting each other

Coping with a diagnosis of cancer is difficult enough without the added worry of Covid-19. It can be very difficult if you are advised to stay at home and reduce face-to-face contact.

Isolation can be incredibly difficult, especially for those going through cancer treatment when the love and support of family and friends is so important. As we try to cope as best we can, we must remember that these measures are there to protect the most vulnerable of our friends and family, and will not be around forever.

It's important to look after your physical and mental well-being. We know this isn't easy to do when you have to stay at home.

Things you can do to help yourself:

- Keep in touch to those close to you by phone or video chats –sometimes seeing someone's face can help you feel less alone.
- Ensure you keep phones/devices charged, and have credit on your phone so that you can stay connected.
- Get into a routine at home.
- Try to eat healthy and keep active.
- It's perfectly understandable that you might be feeling more anxious than usual. Common causes of concern can include worries about cancer treatment changes and delays, or concerns about Covid-19 and how it could affect you. Talk to your loved ones or your medical team about how you are feeling.
- You might miss the reassurance of going into the hospital or clinic to see your doctors or nurses. Talk to your medical team at your appointments and ask what support is available.

Summary

- Lung cancer weakens your lungs so unfortunately this means you are at greater risk of becoming seriously unwell if you develop Covid-19.
- It is vital that you follow national advice on how to protect yourself.
- Talk to your medical team about your individual risk and do not hesitate to contact them if you develop symptoms.
- If you are concerned about how Covid-19 is impacting your treatment plan, talk to your medical team.
- It's okay to feel anxious at this time, it is a very difficult time for lung cancer patients. Ask loved ones for support and let them know how you are feeling.
- Check with your local lung cancer organisations to see what support is available to you or talk to your medical team.



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This information leaflet has been produced by the Global Lung Cancer Coalition (GLCC) secretariat and reviewed by lung cancer experts. For more information on the support and information services available in your country, visit www.lungcancercoalition.org Version 1.0 – January 2021.