Information on coronavirus and COVID-19 for people affected by hepatitis B or hepatitis C

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is caused by a new strain of coronavirus that was first reported in December 2019.¹ Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that can make humans and animals sick.

For the most current and free advice on COVID-19 please visit the national healthdirect website.

How do you get COVID-19?

The virus causing COVID-19 can be spread from person-to-person through:

- close contact with someone who has the virus, which includes:
  - contact with droplets from an infected person’s cough or sneeze
  - touching objects or surfaces that have cough or sneeze droplets from an infected person, then touching your face.²

Protecting against COVID-19

The latest information advises that good hygiene and social distancing are the best ways to protect against COVID-19, including:

- washing your hands often and thoroughly with soap and water
- covering your mouth with your elbow or a tissue if you cough or sneeze – throw the tissue away and wash your hands immediately
- avoiding touching your face
- avoiding close contact with people who have a fever or cough
- staying home if you are unwell
- cleaning and disinfecting surfaces
- minimising physical contact with other people, including sexual contact with casual partners
- keeping a distance of 1.5 metres between you and other people whenever possible
- avoiding large public gatherings.

The use of surgical masks is only recommended if you already have the virus to reduce you spreading it to others, or if you are caring for someone who has COVID-19.

If you are well, you do not need to wear a surgical mask. Reducing physical contact is more important. You can find out more about surgical masks in this factsheet from the Department of Health.

Symptoms of COVID-19

The virus will affect individuals differently. Most people who come in contact with the virus will experience a mild illness but can still spread the virus to others.

Some people can go on to develop serious effects such as pneumonia – people at particular risk of severe disease are listed on the next page. People with COVID-19 most commonly experience:

- fever
- flu-like symptoms, including coughing, sore throat and fatigue
- shortness of breath.²

If you have a fever, cough or other symptoms, seek medical advice early. If you think you could have contracted COVID-19, you should call ahead before visiting a doctor.

If you have serious symptoms such as difficulty breathing, call 000 for urgent medical help.

¹ Close contact includes face-to-face contact, being in an enclosed space with someone for an extended period of time, or contact with a person’s blood or bodily fluids.
What are the risks of COVID-19 for people living with hepatitis B or hepatitis C?

The following groups could be at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19:

- people with weakened immune systems (e.g. people on immune suppressing medications, people receiving cancer treatments)
- older people – the risk being much greater for people aged over 70 years
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- people with chronic medical conditions.

At this stage there is no evidence to suggest people living with hepatitis B or hepatitis C, who are well are at greater risk of infection with COVID-19. However, current information suggests some people living with hepatitis B and hepatitis C who also have other conditions such as hypertension, cardiovascular disease and diabetes will likely have an increased risk of serious illness if they get COVID-19.

People who have developed advanced liver diseases (including cirrhosis) and deteriorating health as a result of hepatitis B or C should be vigilant in protecting themselves from contracting COVID-19 as they are at risk of more serious illness. This includes people who have ongoing health conditions as a result of a previous hepatitis C infection which has been cured.

Will COVID-19 mean any change to treatment and care for hepatitis B or hepatitis C?

People living with hepatitis B or C who are currently taking treatment should not change or stop their treatment unless advised to do so by their treating doctor. People should be aware that recent changes restricting prescriptions to a one-month supply of medications means ensuring you plan and avoid missing doses. There is nothing to suggest that the availability of medications used for hepatitis B or C will be reduced due to COVID-19.

Monitoring your health will continue to be important and access to doctors may vary. Some clinics are establishing telephone consultations but making appointments in advance will be important. You should check with your healthcare provider to see what arrangements they are putting in place. If you have an appointment with your doctor it is good to consider asking your doctor for a liver health check if you have not had one in the last six months.

What can you do to protect yourself if you have hepatitis B or hepatitis C?

People living with hepatitis B or C should use the same protective measures recommended for the general population. Be vigilant and follow the recommended measures to protect yourself against COVID-19. Consult a healthcare provider if in doubt about your risk, especially if you have been around someone who has recently returned from overseas.

People with significant liver disease are recommended to receive vaccinations against influenza and pneumococcal disease. These are funded for people aged 65 and over, and the influenza vaccine is funded for all people with chronic liver disease. Cigarette smoking also increases the risk of severe respiratory illness, and quitting smoking may reduce your chances of complications due to COVID-19.

What should you do if you care for someone who has a chronic health condition or compromised immune system?

If you’re caring for a person who has a chronic health condition or compromised immune system, it’s important to take extra care with handwashing and infection precautions. If you are unwell in any way, it is best to avoid contact with the person while you are unwell.

Providing practical support to people who at higher risk of COVID-19, such as assisting with shopping, collect prescriptions or other errands can also be helpful.

Check that you have a plan in place to seek help if you or the person you are caring for become unwell. This may include checking in with them more regularly, having access to a phone and important phone numbers handy and ensuring medications are accessible.

Where can you get more information about COVID-19?

You can get additional information about the coronavirus on the healthdirect website: www.healthdirect.gov.au/coronavirus
References:


This factsheet was reviewed by the Doherty Institute on 6 March 2020 and updated by Hepatitis Australia on 20 March 2020 following the BBV/STI sector briefing on COVID-19. Hepatitis Australia encourages all readers to seek independent medical advice.