

We understand patients and their families with rheumatological diseases requiring immunosuppressants are concerned in light of the current coronavirus pandemic and wish to seek advice from their clinical teams.

The situation in the UK is changing rapidly with advice being reviewed regularly. We therefore recommend that you follow the advice being provided by Public Health England for the latest information. The “Versus Arthritis” website provides useful information for rheumatology patients as well. [Click here](https://www.versusarthritis.org/news/2020/march/coronavirus-covid-19-what-is-it-and-where-to-go-for-information/)

Here is the latest [Staying alert](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-alert-and-safe-social-distancing/staying-alert-and-safe-social-distancing) guidance from the Government and information on [Staying safe outside your home](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-safe-outside-your-home/staying-safe-outside-your-home) to help reduce your risk of infection. These websites are regularly updated.

**For the most up to date information for patients living in Bradford with the local restrictions, please look at Bradford councils website** [**Bradford Council COVID-19 advice**](https://www.bradford.gov.uk/health/health-advice-and-support/coronavirus-covid-19-advice/#local)**.**

**The main symptoms of coronavirus are:**

* a high temperature – this means you feel hot to touch on your chest or back (you do not need to measure your temperature)
* a new, continuous cough – this means coughing a lot for more than an hour, or 3 or more coughing episodes in 24 hours (if you usually have a cough, it may be worse than usual)
* a loss or change to your sense of smell or taste – this means you've noticed you cannot smell or taste anything, or things smell or taste different to normal

Most people with coronavirus have at least 1 of these symptoms.

**What to do if you have symptoms:**

If you have any of the main symptoms of coronavirus:

1. **Stay at home (self-isolate)** – do not leave your home or have visitors. Anyone you live with, and anyone in your support bubble, must also self-isolate.
2. **Get a test** – get a test to check if you have coronavirus as soon as possible. Anyone you live with, and anyone in your support bubble, should also get a test if they have symptoms. Have a look at this website for information on testing. [Test and trace](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/testing-and-tracing/get-an-antigen-test-to-check-if-you-have-coronavirus/)

We appreciate this is very difficult for people and further government support can be found here [Coronavirus support](https://www.gov.uk/find-coronavirus-support). There is useful information on [Mental health and well being](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-public-on-mental-health-and-wellbeing) here as well.

**Am I at higher risk of COVID 19?**

It remains the case that some people are more clinically vulnerable to COVID-19 than others. These clinically vulnerable people should be especially careful and be diligent about social distancing and hand hygiene.

Clinically vulnerable people are those who are:

* aged 70 or older (regardless of medical conditions)
* under 70 with an underlying health condition listed below (that is, anyone instructed to get a flu jab each year on medical grounds):
* chronic (long-term) mild to moderate respiratory diseases, such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), emphysema or bronchitis
* chronic heart disease, such as heart failure
* chronic kidney disease
* chronic liver disease, such as hepatitis
* chronic neurological conditions, such as Parkinson’s disease, motor neurone disease, multiple sclerosis (MS), or cerebral palsy
* diabetes
* a weakened immune system as the result of certain conditions or medicines they are taking (such as steroid tablets)
* being seriously overweight (a body mass index (BMI) of 40 or above)
* pregnant women

**What is shielding?**

Shielding is a measure to protect people who are clinically extremely vulnerable by minimising all interaction between those who are extremely vulnerable and others. Shielding guidance is advisory. As guidance is updated and your treatments change, patients may fall in and out of shielding so please keep an eye on this website and on the government’s [shielding guidance](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19) website.

Some of our patients within rheumatology will fall within this group and it is recommended that patients that fall under this group follow additional actions to prevent themselves from coming into contact with the virus. Shielding in Bradford has not been paused due to the local outbreak.

**Information on Local Lockdown:**

From 1st August the government had planned to pause the shielding programme but due to a local outbreak of COVID-19, from 31 July 2020, if you live in Bradford District – meaning if you pay Council Tax to Bradford Council - you should follow the local restrictions. Full details and advice from Bradford Council is available here. [Bradford Council COVID-19 advice](https://www.bradford.gov.uk/health/health-advice-and-support/coronavirus-covid-19-advice/#local).

**According to the Bradford Council website above, clinically vulnerable people living in Bradford should continue to shield after 1st August.**

**Who should follow the shielding guidance?**

We have devised a flow chart to identify patients who should shield and letters have been sent out to those that fall under this group at the start of the pandemic.

It has come to our attention that texts from NHS digital are being sent out to some of our patients who we have not identified ourselves as needing shielding. If you have received a text from NHS digital about this and have previously not been identified by ourselves as needing to shield, please look at the chart on the next page to see whether shielding guidance applies to you. If it does and you have not been identified by us already as needing to shield, or if you have any concerns/questions then please contact us and we can advise you.

The chart below focusses on identifying patients with **rheumatological reasons to shield**. If you feel you should be following shielding guidance from the chart and have not been asked to, please contact the rheumatology team and we can advise you.

Similarly, if you have been asked to follow shielding guidance and you feel you do not meet these criteria, please contact the rheumatology team, and we can discuss this with you.

There may be other health grounds that have identified you as needing to shield, for example certain cancer therapies, organ transplants or severe breathing conditions. If this is the case, then please discuss this with your GP or hospital specialist.

**Shielding chart:**



**What is our advice for our rheumatology patients?**

Our general advice is to continue all your immunosuppressant medications because the health risk associated with a flare of your disease is likely to be greater than the risks associated with COVID-19. This is because of;

1. symptoms of your disease itself;
2. infection risk can be higher if your disease is not well controlled;
3. if you had a flare, the treatments needed to control the flare could be risky.

However, should you develop any symptoms of any infection, then we would recommend that your treatment is paused for the duration of the infection. For advice on steroid medication (prednisolone) please see the next page for more information.

There may be individual circumstances where your clinical teams may contact you to review your treatment, should any new evidence emerge about specific treatments.

Research is underway to explore the effectiveness of a number of rheumatic drugs in treating coronavirus, although information remains limited.

**Self management**

We encourage you to have a look at this website for self-management in the first instance [Managing pain at home](https://www.csp.org.uk/conditions/managing-pain-home) to minimise your risk of COVID 19 by reducing hospital attendance and the need for treatments that could potentially put you at higher risk of infection. Simply click on the relevant body part to be taken to a full list of resources to help manage symptoms at home.

**What about anti-inflammatories (eg ibuprofen, naproxen) or NSAIDS?**

There have been reports in the media regarding anti-inflammatory drugs such as naproxen and ibuprofen.

There is no evidence that the acute use of NSAIDs causes an increased risk of developing COVID-19 or of developing a more severe COVID-19 disease.

There is currently no reason for patients to stop taking NSAIDs if you are already taking this for a long term condition but this may need reassessment should you develop COVID-19 infection. Please speak to your doctor about this.

**What about Vitamin D?**

If you're not going outdoors often, you should consider taking a daily supplement with 10 micrograms of vitamin D. These supplements can be bought in many supermarkets.

**What do I do with my medications if I develop infective symptoms?**

If you develop a viral infection, immunosuppressant medication will need to be stopped temporarily, as with any infection, but this should be done in consultation with your clinical team.

**What about steroid tablets (for example prednisolone) and adrenal insufficiency?**

Steroids should **NOT** be stopped suddenly and the dose will need to be reviewed by your clinical team.

Please make sure you tell your treating doctors that you are taking steroids and/or immunosuppressive treatments. You can print out a [Steroid alert card](https://www.endocrinology.org/media/3563/new-nhs-emergency-steroid-card.pdf) to keep with you.

Your body needs a little bit of steroid to function every day and this is made naturally in your adrenal glands. Your body needs a bit of extra steroid if you have a serious infection to help your body work during this time. Adrenal insufficiency occurs when your body cannot make this extra natural steroid.

If you have been taking 5mg of prednisolone or more for 4 weeks or longer, this may cause **adrenal insufficiency.** This can also occur once the dose of prednisolone has been reduced to below 5mg.

If you have coronavirus infection and are taking 5-19mg prednisolone daily, you should take 10mg prednisolone every 12 hours while you are unwell. This will be an increase in your total prednisolone dose.

Patients on more than 20mg prednisolone, should continue their usual dose but take it split into two equal doses of at least 10mg every 12 hours while you are unwell.

Should you develop coronavirus, you should drink plenty of fluids especially if you have adrenal insufficiency.

Are you unwell

with coronavirus infection and on prednisolone?

All patients should drink plenty of fluids especially if you have adrenal insufficiency.

Are you taking more than 20mg prednisolone a day?

Are you taking between

5-19mg prednisolone a day

You should continue your usual dose of prednisolone but take it split into two equal doses of at least 10mg every 12 hours (twice a day) while you are unwell.

You should increase your prednisolone to 10mg every 12 hours (twice a day) while you are unwell.

If you have any concerns about what to do with your medications, please contact the rheumatology helpline or your GP.

**What about returning to work?**

People living inside and outside of Bradford can continue to travel in and out for work. Workplaces must implement Covid-19 Secure guidance.

The **general** advice is:

* Everyone should work from home unless they cannot work from home.
* **Clinically extremely vulnerable individuals** (those who have received shielding letters) have been strongly advised not to work outside the home.
* **Clinically vulnerable individuals**, who are at greater risk of severe illness (for example, people with pre-existing conditions) have been asked to take extra care in observing social distancing and should be helped to work from home, either in their current role or in an alternative role.

**More specific information** about returning to work can be found here [Working safely during coronavirus](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19) related to specific employment roles. Please have a look at the link as this will have the most relevant information related to your line of work. The versus arthritis website is also very helpful. [Versus Arthritis Employment Advice](https://www.versusarthritis.org/covid-19-updates/covid-19-employment-and-work-information/)

**How is our service changing?**

We have moved to telephone consultations to reduce the need for patients to travel to reduce face to face contact. We appreciate that this is a significant change in how the NHS has operated, but it is necessary to protect you and your family. If we feel a face to face review is needed following a telephone or video consultation we can arrange this.

If you have a face to face appointment at the hospital, all visitors and outpatients will now need to wear a form of face covering to prevent spread of infection from the wearer.

Visitors need to provide a barrier covering the mouth and nose and this can be a home-made fabric mask or even a simple scarf which can be more comfortable than a surgical mask. For patients wearing a niqab, if the veil covers the mouth and nose, this is an acceptable face covering. Home-made masks should be laundered daily.

PLEASE DO NOT ATTEND THE HOSPITAL OR YOUR GP’S SURGERY IF YOU HAVE A CONTINUOUS COUGH, FEVER OR LOSS OR CHANGE IN TASTE OR SMELL. You should self-isolate and follow NHS advice, which is continuously updated. [Stay at home guidance for households with possible coronavirus](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection)

**Blood monitoring:**

The way we are arranging blood tests to be done is also changing. If bloods are needed following a telephone clinic, you will be asked to make an appointment with our blood taking department. In some circumstances, we may be able to increase the interval between blood tests and your GP and rheumatology team will be aware of this.

**Hoax emails**

Please be wary of a large number of hoax emails, websites, tweets and text messages or advice online from seemingly legitimate ‘doctors’. All advice should be sought from the links provided in this document.

**Summary of links provided above**

**Bradford Council**

[https://www.bradford.gov.uk/health/health-advice-and-support/coronavirus-covid-19-advice/#local](https://www.bradford.gov.uk/health/health-advice-and-support/coronavirus-covid-19-advice/%23local)

**Versus arthritis**

<https://www.versusarthritis.org/news/2020/march/coronavirus-covid-19-what-is-it-and-where-to-go-for-information/>

**Government Staying alert and Social distancing advice**

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-alert-and-safe-social-distancing/staying-alert-and-safe-social-distancing>

**Government advice staying safe outside your home**

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/staying-safe-outside-your-home/staying-safe-outside-your-home>

**Government advice on Mental health and well being**

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-public-on-mental-health-and-wellbeing>

**Government advice on ‘Shielding’ and protecting the vulnerable**

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19>

**Working safely during Coronavirus:**

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19>

**Staying at home guidance for household with possible coronavirus**

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection>

**Coronavirus support**

<https://www.gov.uk/find-coronavirus-support>

**Managing pain at home**

<https://www.csp.org.uk/conditions/managing-pain-home>

**There is also support from:**

NRAS (National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society)

<https://www.nras.org.uk/news/coronavirus-what-we-know-so-far>

NASS (National Axial Spondyloarthritis Society)

<https://nass.co.uk/news/coronavirus-advice-for-people-on-biologic-therapy/>

Vasculitis UK

<https://www.vasculitis.org.uk/news/coronavirus-covid-19>