COVID-19: A Guide for people living with lung disease or lung cancer

People living with a lung disease or lung cancer are at higher risk of developing severe cases of respiratory infections such as influenza and COVID-19 viruses as well as pneumococcal pneumonia. You may be feeling anxious and concerned about how to best minimise your risk of contracting the virus. The following advice has been prepared specifically for people living with a lung disease or lung cancer.

What is coronavirus and COVID-19?

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that affect the lungs and airways and can make people sick. Some coronaviruses can cause a mild respiratory illness similar to the common cold whilst others result in serious diseases like pneumonia and respiratory failure. The more serious coronaviruses include Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome 1 and 2 (SARS-CoV-1 and SARS-CoV-2) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). The coronavirus disease outbreak is called COVID-19 (caused by SARS-CoV-2).

How does it spread?

COVID-19 spreads from person-to-person through the viral particles entering the nose or mouth after close personal contact from an infectious person. This may happen by:

- Direct contact such as kissing, hugging, or shaking hands (and then touching your mouth)
- Aerosol transmission, such as when people talk, shout or sing
- Crowded indoor environments with poor ventilation and limited air movement has the highest risk of aerosol transmission (like restaurants, nightclubs, places of worship and workplaces).

Who is at risk?

Now that many people have been vaccinated and have had previous infection with COVID-19, the risk of severe disease is less than before. Like other viruses, such as influenza, some people who are infected with COVID-19 may not get sick at all or will experience mild symptoms and will recover quickly. For a small percentage of people, COVID-19 can still make them very ill resulting in hospital admission or chronic symptoms (long COVID). People most at risk of serious infection and chronic symptoms are:

- People with compromised immune systems, such as people with cancer or previous organ transplantation
- People with diagnosed chronic medical conditions including lung disease (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and pulmonary fibrosis)
- Elderly people and those living in nursing homes
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Considerations for people living with a lung condition

If you are living with a lung condition, it is important to not only practice good respiratory hygiene as the best defence against the virus, but you may also want to consider additional steps to minimise your risk of exposure or to prevent severe disease and chronic symptoms.

How to help prevent infection

Good hygiene practices, recommended by the Australian Medical Association and Department of Health include:

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water, especially before and after eating and going to the toilet. If soap and water are not available, use a 60% alcohol-based hand sanitiser
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or a flexed elbow when you cough and sneeze
- If unwell, avoid contact with others (touching, kissing, hugging, and other intimate contact) and stay more than 1.5 metres away from others to reduce the spread of virus particles
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth
- Try to avoid close contact with people who are unwell.

Connecting with your treating healthcare team

Take the time to speak to your treating healthcare team about reasonable precautions you can take to minimise your risk of exposure to COVID-19, as they are best-placed to provide advice suitable to you and your condition.

To enable you to effectively manage your overall health and to minimise your risk of exposure, contact your GP for more information. Your GP may also offer telehealth consultations.

Action plan

Action plans help you understand your day-to-day lung disease symptoms and current medications, how to recognise when your symptoms change or worsen and what action you need to take. Ensure you have an action plan developed with your treating doctor and it is up-to-date.

Your action plan should include testing for COVID-19 (rapid antigen testing at home or PCR testing in a pathology laboratory). Please note that in many locations around Australia, a PCR test for COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses requires a valid medical referral. Speak with your doctor about whether this may be appropriate for you.

To effectively follow the instructions on your action plan, ensure you have the necessary prescriptions from your doctor and an adequate supply of in-date medication. Anti-viral medications for COVID-19 are available for many people that are at increased risk of severe disease. These work best when they are started early, so check to see if you are eligible for anti-virals based on your specific situation. There are possible interactions with other medications that you may be taking, so it is important to mention what medications you are on to the doctor prescribing the anti-virals.

Vaccination

It is important that your vaccinations for respiratory infections are up-to-date. These have been shown to protect against severe disease and reduce the risk of hospitalisation. Organise with your treating healthcare team to have your COVID-19, influenza and pneumococcal pneumonia vaccinations updated on a regular basis.

When to seek medical attention

If you're experiencing any cold or flu-like symptoms, seek medical attention as early as possible. You should telephone your health clinic or hospital before you arrive and tell them your travel history or if you may have been in contact with a potential case of COVID-19.

If you want to talk to someone about your symptoms first, call the Coronavirus Health Information Line for advice on **1800 020 080**.

COVID-19 symptoms include:

- Fever
- Cough
- Sore throat
- Shortness of breath
- Chest pain.

Self-management techniques

There are some self-management techniques that you may wish to consider. Should your symptoms worsen, you should contact your local GP or local health care provider. If you cannot breathe, experience severe chest pain or cough up blood you should call an ambulance or present to your nearest emergency department without delay. Self-management techniques for less severe disease include:

- Nasal breathing
- Pacing approaches
- Self-management plan.

Self-management tips include:

- Maintaining a healthy diet, staying well hydrated and avoid lifting heavy items. This will help control fatigue symptoms.
- Using a steam inhalation to clear mucus and phlegm and sipping warm fluids to help with a sore throat.
- Try lying flat on your stomach or side (use a pillow to prop yourself up) or leaning against a wall with your back straight up against it with your feet apart to reduce breathlessness.

If your symptoms worsen, if you are pregnant or have any chronic conditions, or you have concerns about your health, contact your GP as early as possible.

Long COVID Resource

Long COVID is caused by infection with the SARS-CoV-2 virus and is a chronic health condition that lasts at least three months in duration. It is a new and complex illness that patients and healthcare professionals are beginning to better understand. Long COVID can impact many organs of the body and affects everyone differently. For some people it may cause symptoms such as breathlessness, cough, hoarse voice, and fatigue whereas other people may experience memory or thinking problems (often referred to as "brain fog").

We've developed a long COVID resource and have detailed some of the [common symptoms and management tips](#) that you may like to consider.

Useful telephone numbers

- Coronavirus Health Information Line: **1800 020 080**. Call this line if you are seeking information on COVID-19. The line operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- Healthdirect Helpline: **1800 022 222**. Call this line if you are not sure what to do—whether you should see a local GP, manage the condition at home, or go to an emergency department. The line is staffed by registered nurses and operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
- **13HEALTH (QLD residents only):** 13 43 25 84. Call this line for health information and assessment of symptoms. The line is staffed by registered nurses and operates 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Our **Information and Support Centre** is still available from Monday to Friday 8:00am to 4:30pm (AEST). You can contact our staff on **1800 654 301** and press 3 for the telephone service. If we are already on the telephone, please leave a message and our staff will return your call as soon as possible.

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