

30th March 2020

Dear Patient,

We have been asked by the NHS to give all our patients suffering from an inflammatory rheumatological condition guidance about whether or not you need to go into shielding, self-isolation or maintain social distancing.

Please find below advice about which category you belong. You will also find explanations of what is meant by shielding, self-isolation and maintaining social distancing and links to find out more.

1. Shielding:

You belong to the shielding group if you take:

- Prednisolone 20mg or more daily or
- Prednisolone 5mg or more daily **plus** one immunosuppressant drug* or
- **Two** immunosuppressant drugs **plus** suffer from any comorbidity** outlined below.

2. Self-isolate:

You belong to the self-isolation group if you take:

- One immunosuppressant drug or
- One immunosuppressant drug **plus** Sulphasalazine or Hydroxychloroquine or
- One immunosuppressant drug **plus** any comorbidity

3. Social distancing:

You belong to the social distancing group if you take:

- Hydroxychloroquine and/or
- Sulphasalazine

*Immunosuppressant drugs are: Methotrexate, Leflunomide, Ciclosporin, Apremilast, Mycophenolate, Azathioprine

**Comorbidities: aged 70 or over, Diabetes Mellitus, pre-existing lung disease, renal impairment, history of ischaemic heart disease or hypertension

What does shielding mean?

Shielding is a measure to protect extremely vulnerable people by minimising interaction between those who are extremely vulnerable and others. This means that those who are extremely vulnerable should not leave their homes, and within their homes should minimise all non-essential contact with other members of their household. This is to protect those who are at very high risk of severe illness from coronavirus (COVID-19) from coming into contact with the virus.

You can find the detailed explanation in the following pages.

What does self isolation mean?

You should stay at home and if possible, not leave it for any reason, other than to exercise (staying a safe distance from others).

This is known as self-isolation.

If possible, you should not go out even to buy food or other essentials. If you are unable to get supplies delivered, you should do what you can to limit social contact when you do leave the house.

You can find more detailed information on the www.gov.uk website.

What does social distancing mean?

Under the restrictions, people must stay at home and only leave for the following reasons:

- to exercise once a day - either alone, or with members of your household
- shopping for basic necessities, although this should be done as little as possible
- medical need or to provide care for a vulnerable person
- travel to or from work but only where this is absolutely necessary

Gatherings of more than two people not from the same household are banned

If you have to go outside - to buy food for example - you must stay more than 2m (6.5ft) apart from others.

This is what's known as social distancing. Its purpose is to cut down non-essential contact and keep you safe.

You can read the detailed explanation on the www.gov.uk website.

If you have questions or are not sure which category applies to you please get in contact with us on the following number
(local or central number)

You also find helpful information on the Versus Arthritis website which we recommend to read:
www.versusarthritis.org

Yours sincerely,

Connect Health Rheumatology Service

SPECIFIC ADVICE IF YOU BELONG TO THE SHIELDING CATEGORY

Your safety and the continued provision of the care and treatment you need is a priority for the NHS. This letter gives you advice on how to protect yourself and access the care and treatment you need.

If you or the named person you care for are categorised as requiring **shielding**, you are at risk of severe illness if you catch Coronavirus (also known as COVID-19). This is because you have an underlying disease or health condition that means if you catch the virus, you are more likely to be admitted to hospital than others.

The safest course of action is for you to stay at home at all times and avoid all face-to-face contact for at least twelve weeks from today, except from carers and healthcare workers who you must see as part of your medical care. This will protect you by stopping you from coming into contact with the virus.

If you are in touch with friends, family or a support network in your community who can support you to get food and medicine, follow the advice in this letter. If you do not have contacts who can help support you go to www.gov.uk/coronavirusextremely-vulnerable or call 0800 0288327, the Government's dedicated helpline.

If, at any point, you think you have developed symptoms of coronavirus, such as a new, continuous cough and/or high temperature (above 37.8 °C), seek clinical advice using the NHS 111 online coronavirus service (<https://111.nhs.uk/covid-19/>). If you do not have access to the internet, call NHS 111. **Do this as soon as you get symptoms.**

You, or the person you care for, should:

- strictly avoid contact with someone who is displaying symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19). These symptoms include high temperature (above 37.8 °C) and/or a new and continuous cough
- not leave your home
- not attend any gatherings. This includes gatherings of friends and families in private spaces e.g. family homes, weddings and religious services
- not go out for shopping, leisure or travel. When arranging food or medication deliveries, these should be left at the door to minimise contact
- keep in touch using remote technology such as phone, internet, and social media
- use telephone or online services to contact your GP or other essential services
- regularly wash your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds. Ask carers or support workers who visit your home to do the same.

The rest of your household should support you to stay safe and stringently follow guidance on social distancing, reducing their contact outside the home. In your home, you should:

- minimise the time you spend with others in shared spaces (kitchen, bathroom and sitting areas) and keep shared spaces well ventilated
- aim to keep 2 metres (3 steps) away from others and encourage them to sleep in a different bed where possible
- use separate towels and, if possible, use a separate bathroom from the rest of the household, or clean the bathroom after every use
- avoid using the kitchen when others are present, take your meals back to your room to eat where possible, and ensure all kitchenware is cleaned thoroughly.

If the rest of your household are able to follow this guidance, there is no need for them to take the full protective measures to keep you safe.

You will still get the medical care you need during this period. We are considering alternative options for managing your care and will be in touch if any changes are needed. Your hospital care team will be doing the same. We also advise that:

1. Carers and support workers who come to your home

Any essential carers or visitors who support you with your everyday needs can continue to visit, unless they have any of the symptoms of coronavirus. All visitors should wash their hands with soap and water for 20 seconds, on arrival and often.

It is also a good idea to speak to your carers about what happens if one of them becomes unwell. If you need help with care but you're not sure who to contact please visit www.gov.uk/coronavirus-extremely-vulnerable.

2. Medicines that you routinely take

The government is helping pharmacies to deliver prescriptions. Prescriptions will continue to cover the same length of time as usual. If you do not currently have your prescriptions collected or delivered, you can arrange this by:

1. Asking someone who can pick up your prescription from the local pharmacy, (this is the best option, if possible);
2. Contacting your pharmacy to ask them to help you find a volunteer (who will have been ID checked) or deliver it to you.

You may also need to arrange for collection or delivery of hospital specialist medication that is prescribed to you by your hospital care team.

3. Planned GP practice appointments

Wherever possible, we will provide care by phone, email or online. But if we decide you need to be seen in person, we will contact you to arrange your visit to the surgery or a visit in your home.

4. Planned hospital appointments

NHS England have written to your hospital to ask them to review any ongoing care that you have with them. It is possible that some clinics and appointments will be cancelled or postponed. Your hospital or clinic will contact you if any changes need to be made to your care or treatment. Otherwise you should assume your care or treatment is taking place as planned. Please contact your hospital or clinic directly if you have any questions about a specific appointment.

5. Support with daily living

Please discuss your daily needs during this period of staying at home with carers, family, friends, neighbours or local community groups to see how they can support you. If you do not have anyone who can help you, please visit www.gov.uk/coronavirus-extremely-vulnerable.

This letter is evidence, for your employer, to show that you cannot work outside the home. You do not need to get a fit note from your GP. If you need help from the benefit system visit <https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit>.

6. Urgent medical attention

If you have an urgent medical question relating to your existing medical condition, or the condition of the person you are caring for please contact us, or your specialist hospital care team, directly. Where possible, you will be supported by phone or online. If your clinician decides you need to be seen in person, the NHS will contact you to arrange a visit in your home, or where necessary, treatment in hospital.

To help the NHS provide you with the best care if you need to go to hospital as a result of catching coronavirus, we ask that you prepare a single hospital bag. This should include your emergency contact, a list of the medications you take (including dose and frequency), any information on your planned care appointments and things you would need for an overnight stay (snacks, pyjamas, toothbrush, medication etc). If you have an advanced care plan, please include that.

7. Looking after your mental well-being

We understand that this may be a worrying time and you may find staying at home and having limited contact frustrating. At times like these, it can be easy to fall into 4 unhealthy patterns of behaviour, which can make you feel worse. Simple things you can do to stay mentally and physically active during this time include:

- look for ideas for exercises to do at home on the NHS website
- spend time doing things you enjoy – reading, cooking and other indoor hobbies
- try to eat healthy, well-balanced meals, drink enough water, exercise regularly, and try to avoid smoking, alcohol and recreational drugs
- try spending time with the windows open to let in fresh air, arranging space to sit and see a nice view (if possible) and get some natural sunlight. Get out into the garden or sit on your doorstep if you can, keeping a distance of at least 2 metres from others.

You can find additional advice and support from Every Mind Matters and the NHS mental health and wellbeing advice website.

Further information on coronavirus, including guidance from Public Health England, can be found on the [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)¹ and [gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk)² websites.

List of diseases and conditions considered to be very high risk:

1. Solid organ transplant recipients
2. People with specific cancers
 - People with cancer who are undergoing active chemotherapy or radical radiotherapy for lung cancer
 - People with cancers of the blood or bone marrow such as leukaemia, lymphoma or myeloma who are at any stage of treatment
 - People having immunotherapy or other continuing antibody treatments for cancer • People having other targeted cancer treatments which can affect the immune system, such as protein kinase inhibitors or PARP inhibitors
 - People who have had bone marrow or stem cell transplants in the last 6 months, or who are still taking immunosuppression drugs
3. People with severe respiratory conditions including all cystic fibrosis, severe asthma and severe COPD
4. People with rare diseases and inborn errors of metabolism that significantly increase the risk of infections (such as SCID, homozygous sickle cell)
5. People on immunosuppression therapies sufficient to significantly increase risk of infection
6. People who are pregnant with significant heart disease, congenital or acquired

1 <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>

2 <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>