

Recommendations to people with Multiple Sclerosis on COVID-19

Last updated on 14 April 2020

COVID-19 is a new illness that can affect your lungs and airways. It is caused by a novel coronavirus that was first detected in people in China in 2019, and has since spread to other parts of the world. The following are recommendations made by our society based on guidelines from international Multiple Sclerosis (MS) expert groups. They will be reviewed and updated as newest evidence of COVID-19 becomes available.

Are MS patients at higher risk of getting COVID-19?

Having MS does not increase the chance of contracting COVID-19. However, certain factors associated with MS may increase your risk of complications if you are unfortunately infected, which includes:

- Age 60 or older
- Chronic lung and heart disease, diabetes or cancer
- Significantly restricted mobility, such as being chair or bed-bound most of your day
- Using disease modifying therapies for MS

Should I stop my medications for MS?

No. You should not stop your MS medications without medical advice. Although disease modifying therapies (DMT) for MS will affect the body's immune system, and increase the risk of complications for those infected with COVID-19, stopping DMTs without medical advice would significantly increase the risk of disease relapse, which may lead to unnecessary hospitalization and even the need for high-dose steroid treatment.

There are currently three categories of registered DMT for MS in Hong Kong:

- (1) Immunomodulators that generally **do not suppress the immune system**, and do not increase the risk of infections:
 - interferons
 - natalizumab
- (2) Immunomodulators that **restrict the ability of the immune system to respond to infection** and may increase the risk of infections:
 - teriflunomide

- dimethyl fumarate
- fingolimod

(3) Immunosuppressants that **reconstitute the immune system with prolonged depletion of lymphocytes**, which may increase the risk of infections:

- alemtuzumab
- cladribine
- rituximab **unregistered**

If you are using DMTs in category (3), you may consult your doctor-in-charge, and discuss the pros and cons of delaying the next treatment course.

If you are using DMTs in category (2), or have changed from interferons in category (1) to oral medications in category (2), you should continue your current medication, and **avoid switching without medical advice**.

If you are newly diagnosed with MS and plan to start DMT, you should discuss thoroughly with your doctor-in-charge the pros and cons of the different treatment options.

Is it safe to return to the hospital for follow-ups?

The majority of MS patients are on DMTs, and it is risky to default your appointments without proper arrangements. Remember to wear a surgical mask when you return to your hospital or clinic. If your MS control is stable, you may consult your individual centre to inquire about the possibility of having alternative means of consultation and medication refill.

What should I do to minimize my risk of contracting COVID-19?

Use masks appropriately:

As COVID-19 spreads by droplet, and infected individuals may be asymptomatic during the early phase, you should always wear a surgical mask when you go out. Do not re-use masks, and clean your hands immediately after you touch the outer surface of the mask.

Keep your hands clear:

Clean your hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, or use an alcohol based (at least 60%) hand rub, especially after you have come into contact with public facilities such door knobs, handrails, or elevator buttons. Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth unless your hands are clean.

Practice social distancing:

Avoid public gatherings and crowds, minimize the need to go out, and when you do, if possible, avoid using public transport. Keep at least 1.5m distance from others to avoid droplets from their coughing and sneezing. When you cough or sneeze, cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or flexed elbow.

Maintain cleanliness of personal belongings and the environment:

Clean and disinfect personal belongings that you frequently come into contact with, such as mobile phones, table surfaces and door knobs. Ensure food safety by using different chopping boards for raw and cooked foods, and wash your hands between handling them.

At this time, there is no specific recommendation for MS patients who are pregnant and underage. There is general information on COVID-19 and pregnancy from the US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/pregnancy-breastfeeding.html>

Caregivers and family members of people with MS should also follow these recommendations to reduce the chance of bringing COVID-19 into the home.

References:

- 1) Multiple Sclerosis International Federation (www.msif.org)
- 2) National Multiple Sclerosis Society (www.nationalmssociety.org)
- 3) European Academy of Neurology (www.ean.org)