

Recommendations to people with Neuromyelitis Optica Spectrum Disorders on COVID-19

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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 for patients with Neuromyelitis Optica Spectrum Disorders (NMOSD) based on guidelines from international expert groups. They will be reviewed and updated as newest evidence of COVID-19 becomes available.

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

Having NMOSD does not increase the chance of contracting COVID-19. However, certain factors associated with NMOSD 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 immunotherapy for NMOSD

Should I stop my medications for NMOSD?

No. You should not stop your NMOSD medications without medical advice. Although immunotherapy for NMOSD will affect the body's immune system, and increase the risk of complications for those infected with COVID-19, stopping medications 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 two categories of common immunotherapy for NMOSD in Hong Kong:

- (1) Immunomodulators that **restrict the ability of the immune system to respond to infection** and may increase the risk of infections:
 - azathioprine
 - mycophenolate mofetil
 - cyclophosphamide

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

- rituximab

If you are using immunotherapy in category (2), you may consult your doctor-in-charge, and discuss the pros and cons of delaying the next treatment course.

If you are newly diagnosed with NMOSD and plan to start immunotherapy, 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 NMOSD patients are on immunotherapy, 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 disease 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 NMOSD 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 NMOSD 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)
- 4) European League Against Rheumatism (www.eular.org)