

Coronavirus (COVID-19) and cancer

What you should know

Am I more at risk of getting seriously ill if I catch coronavirus?

Your risk depends on a number of factors such as the type of cancer you have, your age, whether you have any other health conditions and if your cancer treatment has made your immune system less effective at fighting off infections. This can happen with some cancer drugs and other treatments like radiotherapy. You may also be more vulnerable while recovering from surgery.

Usually people's immune systems recover in the weeks and months after active treatment has ended, but everyone is different, so it's best to be extra careful.

I had cancer in the past – am I more at risk from the virus?

Most people's immune systems have fully recovered a few months after their treatment has ended. If your immune system has recovered, your risk will not be significantly higher than other people the same age and general health as you.

You should still follow the advice about how to protect yourself from infection.

Everyone's risk is different – it depends on your cancer type, your treatment, your age and your general health. If you're worried, the best thing to do is ask your cancer doctor or oncology nurses, who know your medical history.

High-risk patients

You may be at higher risk of having complications from coronavirus if you:

- Are having chemotherapy
- Are having radical radiotherapy for lung cancer
- Have a cancer of the blood, bone marrow or lymphatic system, such as leukaemia, myeloma or lymphoma
- Are having immunotherapy or other continuing antibody treatments
- Are having other targeted cancer drugs that can affect the immune system, such as protein kinase inhibitors or PARP inhibitors
- Have had bone marrow or stem cell transplants in the last 6 months, or you're taking immunosuppression drugs

Cocooning

If you're at high risk, follow the advice on cocooning, to reduce your risk of coming into contact with the virus. For example, staying at home as much as possible and avoiding physical contact with other people.

Please call our cancer nurses on 1800 200 700 for advice about cocooning, services to support you while you're cocooning or how to care for someone cocooning.

PROTECT YOURSELF



Wash your hands regularly or use alcohol hand rub. Wash with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds. Rub your hands together to form a lather and rub the backs of your hands, between your fingers and under your nails. Rinse well and dry on a paper towel.



Don't touch your face, mouth or eyes with unclean hands.



Catch your coughs in your **elbow / a tissue**. Put the tissue in the bin and **wash your hands straightaway**.



Regularly clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces.



Don't share objects that touch your mouth – for example, bottles, cups.



Don't shake hands.



Wear a face covering when meeting people indoors and in places where it's hard to keep a distance from others, such as on public transport and in shops. Always follow the latest official advice on face coverings.



Limit contact with other people, especially anyone who has travelled abroad in the past 2 weeks or who is ill with a cough or difficulty breathing.



Keep **6ft / 2m distance** from other people.



Make sure anyone in contact with you and their friends and family are also **following the advice about social distancing, face coverings and hygiene**. They could be putting you at risk if they don't.



Report any symptoms immediately.

Other tips for people affected by cancer

- Make a joint plan with family, friends and neighbours for the support you need now, or if you become unwell.
- Refill your prescription medications and have over-the-counter medicines and supplies, for example, cold and flu medication, tissues and a thermometer.
- Keep physically active, if possible.

Symptoms of coronavirus



Symptoms include fever (high temperature above 38°C / 100.4°F), cough, shortness of breath, or a loss or change to your sense of smell or taste.

What should I do if I have symptoms?

Isolate yourself and call a healthcare professional for advice:

- **If you're having treatment or have finished treatment in the past 6 months**, phone your oncology unit immediately.

Any infection can be serious if your immune system is low. Your hospital team can assess if your symptoms may be related to your cancer or to coronavirus.

- **If you're waiting for treatment to start or you've recovered from cancer**, phone your GP or hospital team for advice.

Don't go to a hospital, treatment clinic or a doctor's surgery without talking to a healthcare professional first.

Will I be able to have my treatment?

You should carry on with your treatment and keep taking any medication unless your doctor tells you to stop.

Hospitals are working to keep cancer patients safe and give them the best possible care.

The risk from coronavirus may mean having a phone or video consultation instead of meeting face to face, not having certain types of treatment or postponing treatment for a time.

Your medical team at the hospital will let you know about any changes in your treatment plan or changes to hospital procedures. For example, they may advise you to cocoon for 2 weeks before treatment, to reduce your risk of coming into contact with COVID-19. Ask them if you need to cocoon before, during or after treatment, and for how long.

What if my treatment is delayed?

You may feel very anxious if your treatment is changed or delayed. Try to talk to your consultant or cancer nurses about why this is happening and what it means for you. You can also talk to our cancer nurses if you're feeling anxious or want advice and support.

I'm worried about money – where can I get help?

Call our Cancer Support Line for information about benefits and entitlements.

Are Irish Cancer Society services still running?

Most of our services are still available. Call or email our nurses for the latest news about our services or if you need help. You can also go to our website www.cancer.ie for updates.



Cancer Support Line

Freephone: **1800 200 700**

Email: cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie

Irish Cancer Society website

www.cancer.ie

Get up-to-date information



Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a new virus. Go to www.hse.ie for the most up-to-date advice.

Leaflet revised July 2020