

HIV and coronavirus - frequently asked questions



Throughout the coronavirus pandemic we've been answering questions about the impact the virus may have for people living with HIV. We've put together a FAQ sheet to help answer these as best we can.

We've based our answers on the available information provided by the British HIV Association (BHIVA), European AIDS Clinical Society (EACS), Public Health England, the NHS, HIV support organisations and other reliable sources of information available in the public domain.

There is some UK study data beginning to emerge, and whilst there is some larger scale study data available outside of the UK, this requires careful interpretation and not all the data has been adjusted to take into account variables that might influence study conclusions. At the moment there are no clear signals we can draw upon to change the advice given to people living with HIV or the care provided by HIV specialist teams.

Am I at greater risk of catching coronavirus? There is no evidence so far to confirm you're more likely to get coronavirus if you're living with HIV, when compared to the general population. It's important to follow the advice on social distancing, hand washing, not touching your face, and to wear a face covering where advised to do so.

Do I have a weakened immune system? If you normally visit your clinic at 6 monthly intervals, have undetectable viral load and you no longer have your CD4 count tested, your immune system isn't considered to be weakened.

My last CD4 result was below 200. Should I be worried? The effect of low CD4 counts on COVID-19 isn't well understood at the moment. It is possible you may be more susceptible to coronavirus where you have a particularly low CD4 count. If your CD4 cell count is below 50 and /or you're recovering from an HIV related illness, you should strictly adhere to social distancing measures, wear a face covering where social distancing isn't possible (any crowded areas) and practice good hand hygiene. If you have any concerns get in touch with your clinic team.

I haven't had a CD4 count result for a long time, should I get this because of coronavirus? Maintaining undetectable viral load allows the immune system to 'get on with the day job'. When HIV is fully suppressed (locked away by treatment) CD4 counts may rise or reach a stable level over time. There's no need to ask for your CD4 to be checked as long as your viral load remains undetectable. Some clinics may take CD4 cell count as part of your routine bloods during this time and there's no harm in asking.

I'm newly diagnosed and just started treatment. Am I at additional risk from coronavirus? This will depend on your first set of blood results when you were diagnosed. We believe when viral load isn't fully suppressed (undetectable) you could be more vulnerable to coronavirus, but we don't have any good quality data to support this at the moment.

Can I still have my routine bloods done? At the start of the pandemic routine blood testing was suspended to avoid unnecessary clinic visits. The majority of clinics are now offering routine blood testing, usually by appointment only. Check with your clinic about appointments and opening times before you attend.

Will I be able to see my HIV Doctor or Nurse for my 6-monthly appointment? Most clinics are still operating telephone or virtual clinic appointments. If you're newly diagnosed with HIV or have concerns about a change in your health your clinic will offer you an appointment. Check your clinic opening times online and make an appointment rather than just turn-up.

Am I more likely to experience severe COVID-19 illness? There is some emerging evidence that may suggest people living with HIV could be at increased risk of experiencing severe COVID-19 illness when compared to those who are HIV negative. More research is needed to confirm this. The British HIV Association (BHIVA) haven't changed their advice on for people living with HIV. Those with a very low CD4 count (below 50) and / or those recovering from severe HIV related illness are advised to strictly observe social distancing measures, avoid unnecessary social contact, wear a face covering and be extra vigilant about hand washing and other general hygiene measures.

Is there anything I can do to help prevent severe COVID-19 illness? Looking after your general health is the best way to help prevent severe COVID-19 illness. Taking your HIV treatment as prescribed, remaining active, managing your weight and giving up smoking can all help. BHIVA recommend that everyone living with HIV should receive the annual seasonal flu vaccination and also the pneumonia vaccination which is effective for between 5 to 10 years. Your GP will usually give you these vaccinations if you've not already had them.

What should I do if I'm admitted to hospital with COVID-19? You are strongly advised to tell the team looking after you you're living with HIV so they can look after you in the best way and undertake the correct tests, investigations and provide the most suitable treatment. You should continue to take your HIV medication as usual unless otherwise directed by the team looking after you with advice from your clinic team or specialist HIV doctor.

What happens if I become unwell and I can't take my medication? If you can't eat or swallow food, you'll be provided with nutrition through a tube which is inserted into your nose and goes down into the stomach. This tube (called a nasogastric tube) will ensure all the necessary nutrients are provided for you as well as some medications you would normally take orally. Some HIV medications are available in liquid form, or can be crushed and dissolved in water, and these can be delivered by the nasogastric tube.

Are there problems with HIV medication supplies? We haven't seen any problems with shortages of medication and there is no need to stockpile medication. Please don't ask your clinic team for additional medication unless you need it, as sudden changes in demand can lead to local shortages. It's good practice to re-order once you open your last 30 days' supply.

Can HIV medications help prevent coronavirus? There currently no high-quality evidence that suggests any HIV medications help prevent someone getting coronavirus. This may change over time as more data becomes available. Please don't share your medications with anyone as they aren't proven to have any effect on coronavirus and could mean you run short. Medication to treat HIV or prescribed as PrEP or PEP should only be used for its intended use and not taken without the advice of a medical professional.

Can HIV medication be used to treat coronavirus? There is no good quality data from trials in the UK to suggest medication used to treat HIV is effective as a treatment for COVID-19. Outside the UK some trials continue to look at this, but none have reported good evidence to support the use of HIV medications to treat COVID-19.

Are there any effective drugs to treat COVID-19? The standard of care for severe COVID-19 illness now includes the use of remdesivir and / or dexamethasone where it is felt these drugs might help. These treatments are effective for those experiencing severe illness, usually those requiring additional support for their breathing, such as mechanical ventilation. It's important that people living with HIV are aware of these particular treatments so they can ask those looking after them about their potential use.

Are there any HIV drug interactions with drugs used to treat COVID-19? Dexamethasone should not be used with combinations that contain rilpivirine, including the single pill combinations Eviplera, Odefsey and Juluca. If you need to be given dexamethasone your HIV treatment will be adjusted to replace the rilpivirine component. Dexamethasone can also reduce doravirine levels, which includes the single pill Delstrigo. In this instance doravirine is given twice daily to compensate for this interaction. It's really important to let the medical team looking after you know what treatment you are taking for HIV or any other prescription medications.

What support is available as my clinic isn't fully open? With the easing of lockdown some support services are starting to re-open where it's possible to practice social distancing. The majority of services continue to be provided online. If you're unable to connect to the internet if you don't have a broadband connection or have enough data or minutes for your phone, some organisations may be able to help with this. It's always worth asking about. Check out our [peer support service](https://www.plushealth.org.uk/peer-support.html) if you'd like to talk to someone else living with HIV. If you don't have home broadband or mobile data, we may be able to help with phone data and minutes, depending on your individual situation.
<https://www.plushealth.org.uk/peer-support.html>