

HIV and coronavirus - frequently asked questions



We've been answering a variety of questions about the impact coronavirus 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, NHS, HIV support organisations and reliable information available in the public domain

Do I have a weakened immune system?

This is the most frequently asked question. Where you're 'stable on treatment' your immune system isn't considered to be weakened. In practical terms this means being on treatment, viral load consistently undetectable, meet the criteria where CD4 cell count is no longer checked and reviewed in clinic at 6 monthly intervals.

Am I at greater risk of getting coronavirus?

There is no evidence so far that you're more likely to get coronavirus than the general population. It's really important to follow the advice on hand washing, not touching your face, taking general hygiene measures and reduce social contact to an absolute minimum. Social distancing measures include working from home, not using public transport (unless absolutely necessary) avoiding other people when shopping, going to work, visiting your GP or other essential activities.

I haven't had a CD4 count result for a very long time, should I get this because of coronavirus?

Maintaining undetectable viral load enables the immune system to 'get on with the day job'. We know once HIV is fully suppressed CD4 counts either continue to rise over time or reach a 'set point'. There's no need to ask for your CD4 to be checked as long as your viral load remains undetectable.

I'm newly diagnosed and just started treatment. Am I at additional risk from coronavirus?

This will depend on your baseline results when you were diagnosed, particularly your CD4 count. 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. If your CD4 count is below 200 you may be more susceptible to coronavirus. In these situations it's best to err on the side of caution and very strictly adhere to social distancing measures, practice good hand and general hygiene. If you have any concerns get in touch with your clinic team.

Am I more likely to experience severe coronavirus illness?

There is no evidence you're at greater risk of experiencing severe illness than your HIV negative peers where you are 'stable on treatment'. So far the progression and duration of coronavirus illness is thought to be no different to that seen in the general population. Those with a lower CD4 count (below 200), aged 70 or above, have an underlying respiratory illness, cardiovascular, heart or kidney disease or diabetes are likely to be more vulnerable to the effects of coronavirus. The advice for this group is to strictly observe social distancing measures, avoid leaving home unless necessary, (working from home), avoid unnecessary social contact and being extra vigilant about hand washing and other general hygiene measures.

What are the symptoms of coronavirus illness (COVID-19)?

The two important symptoms of COVID-19 are fever (temperature above 37.8) and the development of a new, persistent dry cough. In addition, those who have a confirmed coronavirus diagnosis describe the development of a painful sore throat, flu like symptoms (muscle aches) and severe fatigue in the first few days. The dry cough seems to develop a few days after the onset of initial symptoms but this will vary considerably. People also report loss of appetite and feeling 'knocked out'. If you think you have coronavirus you should use the 111 online service and follow the advice provided. **If you experience difficulties with your breathing at any time it's important to seek medical**

assistance by initially calling the 111 service. Please don't go to your GP, HIV clinic or hospital in person, follow the advice provided.

Are there going to be problems with the supply of HIV medication?

It's not expected there will be medication supply shortages. Please don't ask your clinic team for additional medication unless you need it. Sudden changes in demand may lead to shortages. Where your clinic have moved towards non-urgent routine telephone consultations they will ensure repeat medication is readily available and where necessary delivered to you. Please ensure you have at least 30 days supply of your medication and re-order once you're down to 30 days. Please don't stockpile, we've seen what happens in our supermarkets when people stockpile.

Will HIV medication be used to treat coronavirus?

The latest data from a small trial with lopinavir/ritonavir (Kaletra) haven't shown any benefit of including these drugs in the treatment of coronavirus. The use of darunavir has also been considered but it's been found it doesn't bind to coronavirus to prevent it replicating.

Should I switch to a protease inhibitor to help prevent coronavirus?

There is no evidence that protease inhibitors have any beneficial effect in the prevention or treatment of coronavirus. The important thing is you continue to take your medication as usual so you remain undetectable and in good health.

Do other HIV medications help prevent coronavirus?

There is no evidence to support the idea that other HIV medications help prevent coronavirus. There has been some information circulating on social media suggesting the drugs used for PrEP (emtricitabine/tenofovirDF) can help prevent coronavirus. This is not the case. PrEP, PEP and medications used to treat HIV should only be used for the purpose they're prescribed for. Please don't share your medications with anyone as this won't have any effect on coronavirus and could mean you run short of medication.

Do I have to tell my employer I'm living with HIV to work from home?

The social distancing measures announced by the Government advise everyone should work from home where it is practical to do so. You don't need to tell your employer you're living with HIV, just ask if you can work from home in the first instance. If you prefer not to go to work to comply with social distancing measures and this means you cannot do your job your employer should allow this, although they may expect you to take paid or unpaid leave. If this is the case we suggest you contact THT Direct, National AIDS Trust or HIV Scotland for further advice.

I'm really worried I should tell my employer about HIV to protect health. What should I do?

Where you really don't want to tell your employer about HIV you should explain you have an underlying health condition which requires you to work or stay at home to protect your health. If you're asked to provide details of the health condition we suggest you ask your GP to provide a letter which doesn't mention HIV but confirms you have an underlying health condition and should either work or stay at home. If in doubt about the best way to handle this situation contact THT Direct, National AIDS Trust or HIV Scotland of further advice.

I have an underlying health condition as well as HIV. Should I tell my employer?

You'll need to tell your employer about your other health condition (if they don't already know) but you don't need to share information about HIV. Employers have been provided with financial help to ensure staff members who need to stay at home can continue to be paid. If in doubt about the best way to handle this situation contact THT Direct, National AIDS Trust or HIV Scotland of further advice.

I've been told my GP will be contacting some people about coronavirus. Does this apply to me?

The NHS in England will be contacting people who have complex health conditions including some cancers, those receiving chemotherapy, organ transplant recipients, people on dialysis and those with uncontrolled 'brittle' asthma or another serious respiratory conditions. This group of people are most vulnerable to coronavirus and are advised to self-isolate for 12 weeks, to 'shield' them from coronavirus to protect their overall health.

We hope this helps a little and provides answers to some of the questions you may have? Please get in touch by emailing Peer.support@plushealth.org.uk