

# Coronavirus (COVID-19) and cancer

**What you should know**

## Am I more at risk of catching coronavirus?

At the time of printing (April 2020), there's no firm evidence that people affected by cancer have a higher risk of **catching** coronavirus compared to other people the same age. You should still carefully follow all the safety advice.

## Am I more at risk of getting seriously ill if I catch the virus?

Some people who have had a cancer diagnosis have a higher risk of getting seriously ill if they get the virus.

**Some cancer drugs and other treatments like radiotherapy can weaken your immune system**, so that it is less effective at fighting off infections. If this happens, a virus like coronavirus could make you very ill. You may also be more vulnerable while you're 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 as you.

**You should still follow all the measures 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're at higher risk of having complications from coronavirus if you:

- Are having chemotherapy or radical radiotherapy for lung cancer
- Have a blood or bone marrow cancer
- 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

You may have been asked to cocoon for a time if you're at high risk from the virus. Cocooning means you must stay at home and avoid face-to-face contact with other people. Please call our cancer nurses on 1800 200 700 if you have any questions or want to find out about services to support you while you're cocooning.

# PROTECT YOURSELF

Everyone needs to carefully follow all the official safety advice. This is particularly important for people with a cancer diagnosis, the people in contact with them and anyone who finished cancer treatment in the past few months.



Wash your hands regularly for **at least 20 seconds**, using soap and warm water or use alcohol hand rub, especially when you enter and leave home, work etc.



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**.



**Clean and disinfect** frequently touched objects and surfaces regularly.



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



Don't shake hands.



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 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), chills, cough and / or shortness of breath. Other possible symptoms are fatigue, headaches, sore throat, aches and pains.

## What should I do if I have symptoms?

If you have any 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 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.

## **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.

## **Will I be able to get my cancer drugs and other medicines?**

At present the coronavirus is not causing any problems with the supply of medicines. There's no need to stockpile medication.

If you have any questions about your medication, ask your hospital team or your pharmacist.

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

Call our Cancer Nurseline for information about benefits and entitlements.

## Are Irish Cancer Society services still running?

We are doing everything we can to keep our services open and to develop new services to help you.

Our cancer nurses will still be available. Call or email us for the latest news about our services or if you need help. You can also go to our website [www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie) for updates.



### Cancer Support Line

Freephone: **1800 200 700**

Mon-Thurs 9am-8pm and Fri-Sun 9am-5pm

Email: [cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie](mailto:cancernurseline@irishcancer.ie)

or [support@irishcancer.ie](mailto:support@irishcancer.ie)

### Irish Cancer Society website

[www.cancer.ie](http://www.cancer.ie)

### Get up-to-date information



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