Information sheet
Coronavirus

# Coronavirus and MS

We're working with our community to make sure everyone affected by MS gets up-to-date information, practical help and ways to connect.

We know it's tough for lots of people right now and a lot of information is only available online. This factsheet can help you understand coronavirus (COVID-19) and find help. You or your carer can also ring our MS Helpline for more information and ways to get local support. **Call us free from your landline or UK mobile 0808 800 8000** between 9am and 7pm, Monday to Friday.

## What's my risk from COVID-19?

Early research indicates that having MS in itself doesn't increase your risk of getting COVID-19. But some people with MS could be at greater risk of getting the virus, or of complications if they catch it.

### Some people are considered 'clinically extremely vulnerable'

You're considered to be 'clinically extremely vulnerable' if you:

- have significant difficulties with breathing or swallowing (for instance if you need artificial feeding)
- have taken alemtuzumab (Lemtrada) or cladribine (Mavenclad) in the last 12 weeks
- have had HSCT treatment in the last 12 months

If this describes your situation, speak with your MS team about social distancing and hygiene measures to manage the risks. In some areas, the government might suggest extra precautions for a time, like 'shielding' (staying away from others completely).

If you think you or a loved one are in this highest risk category but haven't had a letter or been contacted by your GP, call your GP or hospital doctor to discuss it. That way, you'll get the appropriate advice and support.

### The risk for other people with MS

There are other things that could put you at higher risk – some related to MS, some not. This is a new virus, so it's impossible to give a complete list of all the things that might increase risk.

Our medical advisers have given a general view on the main risks you should think about when deciding how to protect yourself from the virus.

But your MS team will be more familiar with your personal circumstances. So if they tell you to take precautions for any other reason it's very important you follow their advice.

The main extra risk factors are if:

- you're over 70
- you have trouble with things like preparing meals and housework because of frailty
- your frailty or MS symptoms mean you usually need an aid for walking, or you use a wheelchair (score 6.0 or higher on the Expanded Disability Status Scale)
- you have another long-term health condition besides MS, especially obesity, high blood pressure (also called hypertension), or diabetes. This is not a complete list of conditions. Speak to your doctor if you're worried about these or other long-term conditions.
- you're pregnant
- you've had a course of alemtuzumab (Lemtrada) or cladribine (Mavenclad) in the last 6 months
- you're taking fingolimod (Gilenya)
- you've had a course of ocrelizumab (Ocrevus) or rituximab in the last 12 months

These different things add together, so the more that apply, the greater the risk.

If two or more describe your situation, you might want to take more stringent steps to protect yourself. This could include the precautions taken by people who are officially 'extremely vulnerable'.

If you've any one of the risk factors, and your work means you're more exposed to COVID-19, you should speak to your employer and consider working from home or avoiding public contact.

# Social distancing - reducing the risk

Each UK government has its own national guidelines for reducing the risk of getting COVID-19. Your local council will have details of any different advice for your area. But there's general guidance for everyone to follow.

**Stay 2 metres (6ft) away** whenever possible from people who aren't members of your household or support bubble (extended household).

**Wash your hands regularly.**

**Wear a face covering in places where it's hard to keep your distance from other people.** In some places, it's the law to wear one, but you don't have to if a health condition makes it too difficult to wear. You shouldn't be asked to prove if you're exempt. If you have concerns about wearing a face covering, you can call the MS Helpline to talk it through.

**Stay at home and get tested if you or anyone in your household has symptoms.** Call 119 for a test (or 0300 303 2713 if you're in Scotland). Call 111 for urgent medical help (0845 46 47 in parts of Wales). Always call 999 for life-threatening emergencies.

The UK governments consider everyone with MS 'clinically vulnerable', so guidelines recommend you're especially careful about social distancing and hand hygiene.

For more details about national rules and advice:

- In England call Public Health England on 020 8200 4400
- In Scotland call NHS inform on 0800 028 2816
- In Wales call the Welsh Government on 0300 060 4400
- In Northern Ireland call the COVID-19 Community Helpline on 0808 802 0020

### If you're 'clinically extremely vulnerable'

If you're considered 'clinically extremely vulnerable' and you're on the government shielding list, they should contact you whenever their advice changes.

You can call the government numbers on page 2 to find out the latest if you're not sure.

Everyone's risk is different and people may be comfortable with different levels of risk. Our medical advisers have suggested a few important points to remember:

- stick strictly to social distancing rules
- if you go out, minimise time in enclosed spaces like shops and public transport
- if you're outside, open spaces like parks or fields will generally be safest, rather than, for example, urban pavements

If you're feeling uncertain, call our MS Helpline to talk over your situation.

## MS medication

Disease modifying therapies for MS (DMTs) affect your immune system. This can make your chances of infection, or complications from infection, higher.

Generally, the risks are moderate, but the risks vary between different DMTs.

You can find out more about specific treatments by calling the MS Helpline.

Your MS team is best placed to explain if the local situation affects you and your treatment. And before you make any changes it's important to discuss things with them.

## Contacting your doctor or MS team

Our medical advisers stress the importance of attending appointments with healthcare professionals, or seeking help if you feel seriously unwell. The consequences of not getting regular or emergency healthcare can be very serious for people with MS.

## Can I still get help from my local MS Society group?

Most of our local groups can't meet face-to-face right now, but you can still give them a call to see what support they can offer. Call our MS Helpline to find your local group.

## Support with food and prescriptions

The national food box deliveries for 'clinically extremely vulnerable' people have stopped. But there is still help available.

**Wherever you are in the UK,** call your local council to find out how they can support you. You can also call our MS Helpline on 0808 800 8000 and ask us to look up support for you in your area.

**In England,** anyone with MS can call the Royal Voluntary Service for help from NHS volunteers to shop and collect prescriptions: 0808 196 3646.

**In Scotland,** if you are not yet getting assistance, call the National Assistance Helpline on 0800 111 4000.

**In Wales,** get in touch with your local council or voluntary organisation for support.

**In Northern Ireland,** anyone looking for support can call the COVID-19 Community Helpline on 0808 802 0020 or text ACTION to 81025.

We're the MS Society. Our community is here for you through the highs, lows and everything in between. We understand what life's like with MS.

**Together, we are strong enough to stop MS.**

The MS Society provides this information free of charge but if you would like to help cover the cost, which will help towards our essential work, please call **0800 100 133** or visit the fundraising section of our website to make a donation. Anything you can give will be greatly appreciated.

## ▶ MS Helpline

**Freephone 0808 800 8000**

**(closed on weekends and bank holidays)**
**helpline@mssociety.org.uk**

## mssociety.org.uk

facebook.com/MSSociety

twitter.com/mssocietyuk

**FS coronavirus**

Version 4 (November 2020)

Multiple Sclerosis Society
Registered charity nos 1139257/SC041990. Registered as
a limited company in England and Wales 07451571