

COVID-19 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 COVID-19 (coronavirus) 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'

Your doctor **should** consider you 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) within the last 4 weeks (or longer if specified by a clinician)
- have had HSCT treatment in the last 12 months (speak to your MS team to understand at what point your risks will reduce)

- have taken cladribine (Mavenclad), ocrelizumab (Ocrevus) or alemtuzumab (Lemtrada) within the last 6 months AND have 2 or more other risk factors listed on page 2

You **might** also be considered clinically extremely vulnerable by your consultant or GP if 2 or more of some other risk factors describe your situation. We've listed these on page 2. Your doctor might add you to the shielded list on this basis.

Even if you're not on the shielding list, you might want to take more stringent steps to protect yourself, including following guidance in your area for people considered "extremely clinically vulnerable".

This is based on the best clinical assumption until we have more evidence about what can put people at higher risk from COVID-19.

What else might put me at higher risk from COVID-19 if I have MS?

The main extra risk factors are:

- 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
- 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

If you have 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 taking steps to avoid contact with the public. For example, this might apply if you work in a hospital, a care home or a food shop.

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 to follow their advice.

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 our 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. If you're feeling uncertain about going out or meeting people, 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 our 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.

COVID-19 vaccines

All adults with MS in the UK are eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine. And some of those closest to you might also be in the governments' priority list, including family members who provide unpaid care.

In England, anyone 16 or older who lives with you might also be eligible, if you take certain DMTs.

Call the national numbers on page 2 or our MS Helpline to find out who's eligible where you live.

Vaccine information from our medical advisers

We've spoken to our medical advisers about the COVID-19 vaccines. Their joint statement on 12 March included these messages:

"Based on what we know about the way these vaccines work, and high quality evidence from studies of other vaccines and MS, we don't think they will exacerbate MS or its symptoms, provoke a relapse, or prevent DMTs from being effective."

They also looked at how effective the vaccine is if you take certain DMTs:

"Some DMTs might reduce the effectiveness of any vaccine because they prevent the immune system from mounting a complete immune response to the vaccine. Therefore, the COVID-19 vaccine might be less effective for people that have recently taken or are taking certain DMTs."

But they say that "even a reduced response is likely to be better than none, so you should still get vaccinated even if on these therapies. And no one should stop their MS therapy unless specifically requested to do so by their MS team."

You can call our MS Helpline to find out more about the information from our medical advisers, or if you have any questions at all about the vaccine. Or speak to your MS Team.

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.

Your 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

Disclaimer: We've made every effort to ensure the information in this factsheet is correct at the time we publish it. We don't accept liability for any errors or omissions. Seek advice from the sources listed.

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