

Living in the age of COVID-19: Thoughts from the Spire Peer Health team

The Spire Peer Health team has pulled together some thoughts on how you can stay well as we live with the risk of illness from the new coronavirus disease, COVID-19.

This guide suggests ways in which you and your carer team can work with one another to reduce exposure to the infectious disease.

You should use the guide as a supplement to advice from health professionals and official sources, and not as a substitute for them. While the team has drawn on health information publicly available at this time (August 2020), this guide is not intended to be comprehensive and medical understanding of COVID-19 is growing rapidly.

Structure of the guide

The guide has four components:

1. What early signs may suggest you have COVID-19?
2. Who is most likely to become very sick if they contract COVID-19?
3. Extra things to think about for people most at risk from COVID-19.
4. What precautions are most helpful for avoiding COVID-19?

1. What early signs may suggest you have COVID-19?

These are significant early symptoms of COVID-19:

General: fever; chills; sweats; shivering; feeling unusually unwell or tired; muscle pains; loss of smell.

Respiratory: runny nose; cough; sore throat; shortness of breath.

Skin: new bruising or rash; discolouration in extremities such as fingers and toes.

Gastro: nausea; vomiting; abdominal pain; diarrhoea.

You'll find official information on symptoms for COVID-19 at this link:

<https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/victorian-public-coronavirus-disease-covid-19#what-are-the-symptoms-of-coronavirus-covid-19>

2. Who is most likely to become very sick if they contract COVID-19?

The known risk categories for life-threatening complications from COVID-19 apply whether or not the person has a spinal cord injury.

That you have an SCI or similar neuromuscular disorder may mean you would find even a mild case of COVID-19 harder to handle than most people would (just as you may find a cold or the flu harder to handle).

Here is a summary of the risk categories:

Age: anybody over the age of 75.

Obesity: people with grade 1 obesity or higher - Body Mass Index (BMI) greater than 30.

Treatment for cardiac failure: especially if associated with other conditions such as emphysema, kidney failure or diabetes, or with valvular disease or ischaemic heart disease (narrowed arteries).

Diabetes: especially if not well controlled, or associated with other chronic illness.

Treatment for kidney failure: especially if you require dialysis.

Lowered immunity: recent or ongoing chemotherapy; or autoimmune diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis, lupus or HIV; or immunity suppression for kidney or other organ transplant.

Blood disorders: hereditary anaemias, clotting problems, or if you are taking anticoagulant medication for stroke or deep vein thrombosis (DVT).

You'll find authoritative information on risk categories for COVID-19 at this link:

<https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/advice-for-people-at-risk-of-coronavirus-covid-19>

3. Extra things to think about for people most at risk from COVID-19

If it's you

Apart from having strong reasons for avoiding infection, consider where you would be cared for if you were to contract COVID-19.

It may be more practical and safer if it were at a health facility rather than at home. This is especially likely if you also have a high daily care need, or rely on equipment such as a dialysis machine or ventilator.

If you develop significant symptoms or test positive, discuss this question as soon as possible with public health authorities, your care provider, support workers, and your GP or local hospital.

If it's a support worker

Consider what might change if you were to test positive for COVID-19. Remember, your symptoms might be mild. If care from someone else is essential, who would provide that care if you tested positive?

If a support worker falls under one of the risk categories, consider discussing with that worker, and with your care provider, how you would be supported if you were to test positive.

If it's another member of your household

Consider in advance what you would do if you contracted Covid 19 while sharing your

household with a person who was highly at risk.

Also consider what you would do if a high-risk member of your household contracted Covid 19 (even if you were well). Discuss the options with the other household members.

3. What precautions are most helpful for avoiding COVID-19?

The rest of this document is designed to help you and your support workers reduce your likelihood of contracting and spreading Covid-19.

The information is presented in three sections:

- A.** Precautions you must work on together;
- B.** Precautions your support workers can take;
- C.** Precautions you can take.

A. Precautions you must work on together

Reduce mutual exposure

- Consider your risk from mutual exposure. It is not practically possible to eliminate exposure to support workers who work with you very regularly - for example, three or four days per week. However, it may be possible to eliminate your exposure to support workers who work infrequently.
- In the case of support workers who work infrequently - for example, on one day a week only - consider asking them and your care provider if it is practical to reduce exposure by amalgamating some of their hours, or to eliminate exposure by getting the infrequent support worker to do only non-contact work for you, such as gardening, outdoor work, shopping and essential errands.
- Consider whether it is practical to reassign shifts that your frequent support workers do with shared clients, so that you and the other clients are each exposed to the minimum number of support workers.
- Note that a range of circumstances and obligations may constrain your care provider's ability to reassign shifts. Note also that rearrangements taken to reduce exposure may increase other risks. (For example, the fewer carers you work with, the more you will be affected if one cannot work for some reason.)

Develop policy on PPE use

Discuss with all your support workers what personal protective equipment (PPE) usage is acceptable to all of you. (This will include any PPE requirements mandated by health authorities or your care provider.)

Once this is decided, work out the quantity of PPE you will need, and then organise to have it delivered. (If you have a funded supply provider, organise this through them. If you do not have the necessary funding, consider discussing your needs with your care provider, your family or your friends.)

Develop a signal system

Develop with your support workers a hand signal you can all use to indicate an impending cough or sneeze, so that the other person can distance appropriately. (Cough or sneeze into an elbow or a disposable barrier such as a tissue.)

Act early on possible symptoms

Talk to each of your support workers about how important it is to self-monitor for possible symptoms of COVID-19, and to take action immediately if you show one.

Precisely what action is appropriate may change with circumstances. Keep up to date with how health authorities require you to respond to symptoms, and with advice from your care provider.

Broadly, the immediate needs are to protect others in your care team from the possibility you have a coronavirus infection, and to ascertain whether you do in fact have an infection.

- Typically, a support worker with a symptom needs to get tested immediately for COVID-19, and may return to work only after they receive a negative result.
- If it's you with the symptom, get tested immediately, and wear a mask at all times while receiving care.

Plan for the possibility that a support worker contracts Covid 19

If you self-manage your care team, devise with your support workers a plan

for how your care will be delivered if one of them develops Covid-19.

If your support program is organised by a care provider, consider how you might meet a support need that your provider cannot cover.

B. Precautions your support workers can take

Maintain airborne transmission prevention measures:

- Physical distancing (1.5 m where possible);
- Cough or sneeze into an elbow or disposable barrier;
- Avoid talking loudly or shouting;
- Use appropriately the PPE that has been agreed upon for your team (which will include following official advice on PPE, and advice from your care provider).

Avoid contact contamination and transmission:

- Regular hand sanitising;
- Avoid facial contact with hands;
- Decontaminate items and surfaces with potential for facial contact, as well as utensils, and food preparation and consumption areas.

Take appropriate action ***immediately*** on any early symptoms.

C. Precautions you can take

Minimise time with external contacts

- Do only what is necessary, and do it in a manner that is safe for both the support worker and you. (Do not put yourself or your support worker at risk in other ways for the sake of doing things that are Covid-19 safe.)
- Where possible, develop an agenda or plan for the day or week ahead that details what needs to be done, when and where. That will help you minimise time spent, at the same time preventing tasks from being forgotten.

Plan for what to do if you contract Covid 19

Depending upon your level of disability, care requirements and home situation, health authorities will determine whether it is more safe and viable for you to be managed at home or at a health facility.

Discuss with your support workers or your care provider, as early as possible, which of your support workers would be willing to continue to work with you if you were to be diagnosed with Covid 19. Also ask whether they would be happy to work with you in a health facility setting, to the extent that you had funding for this and it was permitted.

Provide the safest possible environment

- Provide, and use, the PPE agreed upon by the team.
- As often as practically possible, decontaminate surfaces and utensils that are involved with facial contact, are used for food preparation and consumption, or are frequently contaminated with bodily fluids.
- Don't rely only upon your decontamination. Avoiding touching your face, and other people's faces, is the best way to prevent contamination. Maintain this behaviour diligently.

Maintain your own health and well-being at optimal levels

- Continue to take all your regular prescribed medication. If your prescription is running low, telephone your GP or call the pharmacy from which you got your last prescription.
- Do not postpone your usual health care. Take care of any medical conditions you have as you would do in normal circumstances.
- Contact your GP and local hospital with the same frequency as you would in normal circumstances.
- In flu season, speak to your GP about getting the flu vaccine.
- Keep your immunity up where possible, by eating a balanced diet, getting regular exercise, and avoiding stress and substance abuse.

This document has been compiled by members of the Spire Peer Health team and does not necessarily reflect official positions or policies of AQA Victoria Ltd.