

Information on coronavirus and COVID-19 for people affected by hepatitis B or hepatitis C

What is COVID-19?

Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that can make humans and animals sick. COVID-19 is caused by a new strain of coronavirus that was first reported in December 2019.¹

COVID-19 in Australia

For the latest updates on COVID-19 in Australia, view the [coronavirus \(COVID-19\) health alert](#) from the Department of Health. This alert is updated daily with the latest medical advice and official reports.

How do you get COVID-19?

The virus can be spread from person-to-person through:

- close contact with someone who has the virus
- contact with droplets from an infected person's cough or sneeze
- touching objects or surfaces that have cough or sneeze droplets from an infected person, then touching your face.¹

Protecting against COVID-19

The latest information advises that good hygiene is the best way to protect against COVID-19, including:

- washing your hands often and thoroughly with soap and water
- covering your mouth with your elbow or a tissue if you cough or sneeze – throw the tissue away and wash your hands immediately
- avoiding touching your face
- avoiding close contact with people who have a fever or cough.¹

Surgical masks are most useful in preventing spreading the infection to others if you already have the virus, or if you are caring for someone who has COVID-19. If you are well, you do not need to wear a surgical mask. You can find out more about surgical masks in this [factsheet](#) from the Department of Health.

Symptoms of COVID-19

The virus will affect individuals differently. Many people who come in contact with the virus will experience a mild illness but some can go on to develop serious effects such as pneumonia – people at particular risk of severe disease are listed on the next page. People with COVID-19 most commonly experience:

- fever
- flu-like symptoms, including coughing, sore throat and fatigue
- shortness of breath.¹

What should you do if you become unwell?

If you have a fever, cough or other symptoms, seek medical care early. If you think you could have contracted COVID-19, you should call ahead before visiting a doctor.

If you have serious symptoms such as difficulty breathing, call 000 for urgent medical help.

What are the risks of coronavirus COVID-19 for people living with hepatitis B or hepatitis C?

The following groups could be at higher risk of serious illness from COVID-19:³

- people with weakened immune systems (e.g. people on immune suppressing medications, people receiving cancer treatments)
- elderly people – the risk becomes significantly greater in those aged over 70 years
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- people with chronic medical conditions.

This information suggests some people living with hepatitis B and hepatitis C could be at greater risk of serious health complications if they become infected with COVID-19. In particular, if you have had hepatitis B or hepatitis C for some time, and have developed advanced liver diseases (including cirrhosis) this makes severe COVID-19 illness more likely. This includes people who have ongoing health conditions as a result of a previous hepatitis C infection which has been cured.

What can you do to protect yourself if you have hepatitis B or hepatitis C?

If you have hepatitis B or hepatitis C, or have previously had hepatitis C, take special care to prevent COVID-19 infection. It is a good reminder to consider asking your doctor for a liver health check if you have not had one in the last six months. Be vigilant and use basic measures to protect yourself against COVID-19 and consult a healthcare provider if in doubt about your risk, especially if you have been around someone who has travelled overseas recently.

People with significant liver disease are recommended to receive vaccinations against influenza and pneumococcal disease. These are funded for people aged 65 and over, and influenza vaccine is funded for all people with chronic liver disease. It is a good idea to make an appointment with your GP to discuss vaccination now. If you are a smoker, Cigarette smoking also increases the risk of severe respiratory illness, and quitting smoking may reduce your chances of complications due to COVID-19.

If you are currently taking treatment for hepatitis B or hepatitis C, or other chronic conditions, it is recommended to ensure you have an adequate stock of your medication to reduce unnecessary visits to health services or pharmacies.

What should you do if you care for someone who has a chronic health condition or compromised immune system?

If you're caring for a person who has a chronic health condition or compromised immune system, it's important to take extra care with handwashing and infection precautions. If you are unwell in any way, it is best to avoid contact with the person while you are unwell.

Providing practical support so that people who at higher risk do not have to be among large groups of people can also be helpful, such as assisting with shopping.

Check that you and the person you care for have a plan in place to seek help if they become unwell. This may include checking in with them more regularly, ensuring they have all medication and vaccinations they need, and confirming they are prepared to call 000 in case of an emergency.

Where can you get more information about COVID-19?

You can get additional information about the coronavirus on the Department of Health website:

- [COVID-19 Health Alert](#)
- [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Information](#)

You can also contact the Coronavirus Health Information Line on 1800 020 080. This line operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

References:

1. Department of Health. (2020, March 4). *Coronavirus (COVID-19)*. Retrieved from Australian Government Department of Health: www.health.gov.au/health-topics/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov [Accessed 5 March 2020]
2. Department of Health. (2020, March 5). *Coronavirus (COVID-19) Health Alert*. Retrieved from Australian Government Department of Health: www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert [Accessed 5 March 2020]

This factsheet was reviewed by the Doherty Institute on 6 March 2020. Hepatitis Australia encourages all readers to seek independent medical advice.