

[Patient Name
Patient address Line 1
Patient address Line 2
Patient address Line 3]

Date

IMPORTANT: PERSONAL

Your NHS number: [NHS NUMBER]

Dear [Patient],

IMPORTANT ADVICE TO KEEP YOU SAFE FROM CORONAVIRUS

Your safety and the continued provision of the care and treatment you need is a priority for the NHS. This letter gives you advice on how to protect yourself and access the care and treatment you need.

We are writing to all of our patients in Rheumatology to help identify patients at increased risk of severe illness if they catch Coronavirus (also known as COVID-19). This is because you have an underlying health condition and may be taking medications which suppress your immune system. This means that if you catch the virus, you are more likely to be admitted to hospital than others.

The level of risk you face, and the advice you must follow, depends on your underlying health conditions and the medication you are taking. **Please carefully read the guidance below to determine your level of risk and the precautions you need to take.** If you are still unsure about your level of risk, we would advise following the guidance for high risk patients.

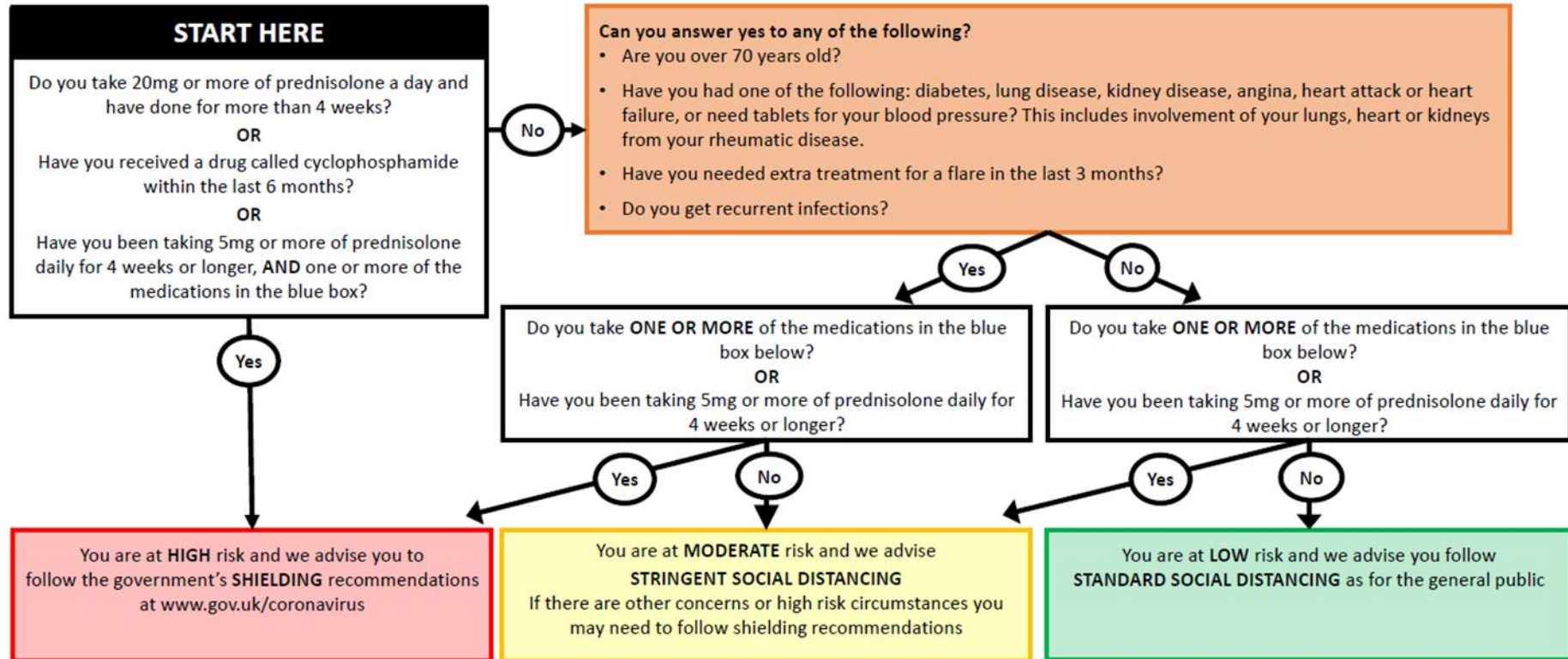
You should continue taking your medications. By stopping your medication, you are more likely to have a 'flare' of your disease, which could make you more likely to pick up an infection. We would only advise stopping your medication if you develop any signs of an infection. However, if you develop signs of an infection it is important to continue your usual dose of prednisolone (steroids) if you are taking this regularly.

Advice on Coronavirus is changing rapidly. Up-to-date guidance on Coronavirus can be found on the NHS website (<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>) and the UK government website (<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>) . These pages are updated regularly to reflect the changing situation and advice.

Please be aware that our services are very busy at present so please take care to read all the guidance first before contacting us. These resources, together with this letter, should provide you with all the information you need to protect yourself from Coronavirus. If you require any further help with your rheumatology condition or medications, please contact your local Rheumatology helpline (01173424881).

Guide to social distancing for rheumatology patients

Based on guidelines from British Society for Rheumatology and related medical associations



BLUE BOX

Conventional immunosuppressant medications include: azathioprine, leflunomide, methotrexate, mycophenolate (mycophenolate mofetil or mycophenolic acid), ciclosporin, cyclophosphamide, tacrolimus, sirolimus.

Biologic/targeted synthetic medications include: rituximab (within the last 12 months); or anti-TNF drugs (etanercept, adalimumab, infliximab, golimumab, certolizumab); tocilizumab; abatacept; belimumab; anakinra; secukinumab; Ixekizumab; ustekinumab; sarilumab; canakinumab, apremilast, baricitinib, tofacitinib, or any biologic biosimilars.

HIGH RISK

If you are high risk the safest course of action is 'shielding'. This is a measure to protect the most vulnerable people by minimising interaction between those who are most vulnerable and others. You should not leave your home and within your home you should minimise all non-essential contact with other members of the household. This is to protect those who would be at most risk from coronavirus from coming into contact with the virus.

If you are in touch with friends, family or a support network in your community who can support you to get food and medicine, follow the advice in this letter. If you do not have contacts who can help support you go to www.gov.uk/coronavirus-extremely-vulnerable or call 0800 0288327, the Government's dedicated helpline.

If, at any point, you think you have developed symptoms of coronavirus, such as a new, continuous cough and/or high temperature (above 37.8 °C), seek clinical advice using the NHS 111 online coronavirus service (<https://111.nhs.uk/covid-19/>). If you do not have access to the internet, call NHS 111.

Do this as soon as you get symptoms.

The shielding measures are:

- strictly avoid contact with someone who is displaying symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19). These symptoms include high temperature (above 37.8 °C) and/or a new and continuous cough
- do not leave your home
- do not attend any gatherings. This includes gatherings of friends and families in private spaces e.g. family homes, weddings and religious services
- do not go out for shopping, leisure or travel. When arranging food or medication deliveries, these should be left at the door to minimise contact
- keep in touch using remote technology such as phone, internet, and social media
- use telephone or online services to contact your GP or other essential services
- regularly wash your hands with soap and water for 20 seconds. Ask carers or support workers who visit your home to do the same.

The rest of your household should support you to stay safe and stringently follow guidance on social distancing, reducing their contact outside the home. In your home, you should:

- minimise the time you spend with others in shared spaces (kitchen, bathroom and sitting areas) and keep shared spaces well ventilated
- Aim to keep 2 metres (3 steps) away from people you live with and encourage them to sleep in a different bed where possible. If you can, you should use a separate bathroom from the rest of the household. Make sure you use separate towels from the other people in your house, both for drying themselves after bathing or showering and for hand-hygiene purposes.
- If you do share a toilet and bathroom with others, it is important that they are cleaned after use every time (for example, wiping surfaces you have come into contact with). Another tip is to consider drawing up a rota for bathing, with you using the facilities first.
- If you share a kitchen with others, avoid using it while they are present. If you can, you should take your meals back to your room to eat. If you have one, use a dishwasher to clean and dry the family's used crockery and cutlery. If this is not possible, wash them using your usual washing up liquid and warm water and dry them thoroughly. If you are using your own utensils, remember to use a separate tea towel for drying these.

We understand that it will be difficult for some people to separate themselves from others at home. You should do your very best to follow this guidance and everyone in your household should regularly wash their hands, avoid touching their face, and clean frequently touched surfaces.

If the rest of your household stringently follow advice on social distancing and minimise the risk of spreading the virus within the home by following the advice above there is no need for them to also shield alongside you.

You will still get the medical care you need during this period. We are considering alternative options for managing your care and will be in touch if any changes are needed. Your hospital care team will be doing the same.

This advice will be in place for at least 12 weeks from the day you receive this letter. We will notify you if there are any further changes.

For high risk patients, we also advise that:

1. Carers and support workers who come to your home

Any essential carers or visitors who support you with your everyday needs can continue to visit, unless they have any of the symptoms of coronavirus. All visitors should wash their hands with soap and water for 20 seconds, on arrival and often.

It is also a good idea to speak to your carers about what happens if one of them becomes unwell. If you need help with care but you're not sure who to contact please visit www.gov.uk/coronavirus-extremely-vulnerable.

2. Medicines that you routinely take

The government is helping pharmacies to deliver prescriptions. Prescriptions will continue to cover the same length of time as usual. If you do not currently have your prescriptions collected or delivered, you can arrange this by:

1. Asking someone who can pick up your prescription from the local pharmacy, (this is the best option, if possible);
2. Contacting your pharmacy to ask them to help you find a volunteer (who will have been ID checked) or deliver it to you.
3. You may also need to arrange for collection or delivery of hospital specialist medication that is prescribed to you by your hospital care team.

It is **safe to continue your Hydroxychloroquine and/or Sulfasalazine** even if you have symptoms of Coronavirus.

3. Planned GP practice appointments

Wherever possible, your GP will provide care by phone, email or online. But if your GP decides you need to be seen in person, they will contact you to arrange your visit to the surgery or a visit in your home.

4. Planned hospital appointments

NHS England have written to your hospital to ask them to review any ongoing care that you have with them. It is possible that some clinics and appointments will be cancelled or postponed. Your hospital or clinic will contact you if any changes need to be made to your care or treatment. Otherwise you should assume your care or treatment is taking place as planned. Please contact your hospital or clinic directly if you have any questions about a specific appointment.

5. Support with daily living

Please discuss your daily needs during this period of staying at home with carers, family, friends, neighbours or local community groups to see how they can support you. If you do not have anyone who can help you, please visit www.gov.uk/coronavirus-extremely-vulnerable.

This letter is evidence, for your employer, to show that you cannot work outside the home. You do not need to get a fit note from your GP. If you need help from the benefit system visit <https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit>.

6. Urgent medical attention

If you have an urgent medical question relating to your **existing** medical condition, or the condition of the person you are caring for please contact us, or your specialist hospital care team, directly. Where possible, you will be supported by phone or online. If your clinician decides you need to be seen in person, the NHS will contact you to arrange a visit in your home, or where necessary, treatment in hospital.

To help the NHS provide you with the best care if you need to go to hospital as a result of catching coronavirus, we ask that you prepare a single hospital bag. This should include your emergency contact, a list of the medications you take (including dose and frequency), any information on your planned care appointments and things you would need for an overnight stay (snacks, pyjamas, toothbrush, medication etc). If you have an advanced care plan, please include that.

7. Looking after your mental well-being

We understand that this may be a worrying time and you may find staying at home and having limited contact frustrating. At times like these, it can be easy to fall into unhealthy patterns of behaviour, which can make you feel worse. Simple things you can do to stay mentally and physically active during this time include:

- look for ideas for exercises to do at home on the NHS website
- spend time doing things you enjoy – reading, cooking and other indoor hobbies
- try to eat healthy, well-balanced meals, drink enough water, exercise regularly, and try to avoid smoking, alcohol and recreational drugs
- try spending time with the windows open to let in fresh air, arranging space to sit and see a nice view (if possible) and get some natural sunlight. Get out into the garden or sit on your doorstep if you can, keeping a distance of at least 2 metres from others.

You can find additional advice and support from Every Mind Matters and the NHS mental health and wellbeing advice website.

MODERATE RISK

If you are in the **moderate risk** group you are unlikely to need to shield yourself. You should follow the national Guidance for Social Distancing for everyone in the UK and hygiene advice as per the NHS and UK Government websites. If you are unsure then please contact your local rheumatology team. **If you develop symptoms of Coronavirus, you should stop your immunosuppressant medications and self-isolate as per the guidance on the NHS website.**

It is **safe to continue your Hydroxychloroquine and/or Sulfasalazine** even if you have symptoms of Coronavirus.

LOW RISK

If you are in the **low risk** group you should follow the national Guidance for Social Distancing for everyone in the UK and hygiene advice as per the NHS and UK Government websites. **If you develop symptoms of Coronavirus, you should stop your immunosuppressant medications and self-isolate as per the guidance on the NHS website.**

It is **safe to continue your Hydroxychloroquine and/or Sulfasalazine** even if you have symptoms of Coronavirus.

National advice is rapidly changing. Further up-to-date information on Coronavirus, including guidance from Public Health England, can be found on the nhs.uk website (<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/>) and the UK government website (<https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>).

Yours sincerely,

Dr Elizabeth Perry, Rheumatology Clinical Lead, University Hospitals Bristol NHS Foundation Trust
Dr Stuart Webber, Rheumatology Clinical Lead, Weston Area Health NHS Trust
Dr Harsha Gunawardena, Rheumatology Clinical Lead, North Bristol NHS Trust
Dr Raj Sengupta, Rheumatology Clinical Lead, Royal United Hospitals Bath NHS Foundation Trust