

COVID-19 FAQs for IBD patients in Singapore

INTRODUCTION

COVID 19 is a disease caused by a novel coronavirus, recently named SARS-CoV-2 by the World Health Organisation. In humans, most patients will have mild symptoms like cough but in a minority, severe lung failure or death can result. You can catch the virus from an infected person through close contact, or via droplets if the infected person coughs or sneezes. It is also possible that the virus is spread via contact with contaminated surfaces such as tables.

We appreciate that you may have some concerns regarding IBD and COVID-19 and we hope that this FAQ will address some questions you might have.

What can I do to protect myself?

- In line with Singapore's Ministry of Health (MOH) advisory, social distancing should be practised by everyone. There should be no gatherings of any size.
- Stay at home as far as possible.
- Leave your home only for essential reasons (eg. work, shopping for groceries). When out and about, maintain a distance of at least 1 metre between persons
- Wear a mask if you do need to leave home.
- Avoid having visitors to your home.
- Wash your hands regularly for at least 20 seconds with soap and water. A portable alcohol based sanitiser gel is a suitable alternative.
- Do not touch your face with unwashed hands.

Am I at higher risk of COVID-19 infection?

- Immunomodulators or biologics alter the way your body's immune system works. This means that you may be at higher risk of a more severe infection if you are infected. This means that you need to adhere strictly with the hygiene measures to protect yourself.

Should I continue taking 5 aminosalicylates (Sulfasalazine, Pentasa, Salofalk, Octasa, Azacol)?

- Yes. 5 ASAs is very safe and is not known to lower a patient's immunity. There is no data to suggest that 5 ASAs increases the risk of COVID19 infection or complications.

Should I continue taking steroids (prednisolone, budesonide), immunomodulators (azathioprine, mercaptopurine, methotrexate), biologics (infliximab, adalimumab, golimumab, vedolizumab, ustekinumab) or tofacitinib?

- Yes. Most patients on IBD treatment should continue taking their medications to achieve or maintain remission. It is important that you remain well during this period, which includes having good control over IBD with medications.
- If you stop your medications, there may be some risk of an IBD flare, which might require the use of other medications like steroids. These might lead to a higher risk of infective complications, including COVID19.
- However, if you suspect that you have COVID19 infection, or have been in close contact with a patient with COVID19, you should seek medical advice from your Gastroenterologist.
- If you require infusions for biologics, workflow processes in clinics and hospitals have been optimised to minimize the risks of infections. Healthcare workers continue to practice high standards of hygiene and personal protection when administering the biologics.

Should I continue visiting my Gastroenterologist?

- Yes. Scheduled visits are important to keep your IBD under control. During a visit, relevant blood tests may be done to check for IBD disease activity and potential complications from IBD medications.
- Discuss with your Gastroenterologist to check if a teleconsultation & home delivery of medications is a feasible alternative to manage your IBD.

I have COVID19 symptoms, what should I do?

- Use a mask to limit droplet spread.
- Seek medical attention at your primary healthcare physician who will assess your symptoms and perform further evaluations as required.
- Do not stop your medications without consulting your Gastroenterologist.

I am having symptoms of a flare, what should I do?

- Get in touch with your Gastroenterologist who will assess you and where needed, help you weigh the benefits and harms of adjusting your IBD medications

CONCLUSION

COVID19 is likely to be with us until the end of 2020 and possibly beyond. You need to keep yourself safe and continue to have medical treatment to keep your IBD under control.

As the situation is dynamic, we would advise that you keep current with the latest developments and seek clarification from your doctor if there are any uncertainties that you may have.

Useful online resources include:

Crohn's & Colitis UK: <https://www.crohnsandcolitis.org.uk/news/coronavirus-covid-19-advice>

Crohn's & Colitis Foundation: <https://www.crohnscolitisfoundation.org/coronavirus/what-ibd-patients-should-know>

Singapore Ministry of Health (COVID19): <https://www.moh.gov.sg/covid-19>

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