



Practical Tips for people with Rheumatoid Arthritis, Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (SLE) and other autoimmune inflammatory rheumatic diseases (AIRD) in the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic  
7<sup>th</sup> January 2022

## How can I reduce my risk of getting COVID-19?

### Vaccination

- Vaccination is the best way to protect yourself, and others around you, from COVID-19.
- **All patients with AIRD should have the COVID-19 vaccine.**
- Many patients with AIRD are recommended to have a 3<sup>rd</sup> primary vaccine dose.
- All patients with AIRD should have a booster dose after the 3<sup>rd</sup> primary dose OR, if not eligible for the 3<sup>rd</sup> primary dose, after the 2<sup>nd</sup> primary dose. All booster doses can currently be administered 4 months after the previous dose. This timing will reduce to 3 months from 31 January 2021.
- The ARA have produced an information sheet on the COVID-19 vaccine specifically for patients. It includes information about the difference between third primary doses and booster doses. This sheet can be found here; <https://rheumatology.org.au/For-Patients/COVID-Information/COVID-Vaccination-Information>

### Other things you can do to reduce your risk

- Wear a mask (preferably N95), ensure it is worn correctly and in appropriate or mandated situations.
- Regular hand washing and good personal hygiene practices continue to be vital.
- Observe all current restrictions. Check your state or territory Department of Health for updates.
- Maintain social distancing especially indoors and avoid crowded or indoor venues.
- Shop online if possible.
- Work from home where you can. If you cannot work from home, ensure physical distancing and hygiene measures are adhered to in the workplace.
- The Australian Government has developed a [COVID-19 action plan](https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/07/coronavirus-covid-19-action-plan.pdf); <https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/07/coronavirus-covid-19-action-plan.pdf> If your doctor has assessed you as being at high risk of severe illness if you contract COVID-19, this action plan will help you manage risks.

## How can I prepare my household for COVID-19?

- Have rapid antigen tests (RAT) at home (these are currently in very short supply but more should be available soon). Most importantly know how to use them.
- Think about who would be able to look after your kids, pets and other dependents if you became unwell.
- Think about who could take you to have a PCR test/medical appointment if you needed one if you were unwell.
- Ensure you have enough prescriptions and medicines for 2 weeks in case you have to isolate.

- Ensure you have access to a thermometer, masks, hand sanitizer, simple pain relief, throat lozenges, tissues and sufficient food if you are unable to have it delivered.

### I have symptoms of COVID-19: what should I do?

- If you have a fever, ( $\geq 37.5^{\circ}\text{C}$ ) or history of fever (e.g. night sweats, chills) OR acute respiratory infection (e.g. cough, shortness of breath, sore throat) OR loss of taste or smell or any other [symptoms of COVID-19](#) perform a rapid antigen test (RAT) if you have one. If you do not have a RAT you will need to have a PCR test.
- New guidelines state that if the RAT is positive you do not need to have a PCR test.
- More information on testing can be found [here](https://www.health.gov.au/health-alerts/covid-19/testing). (<https://www.health.gov.au/health-alerts/covid-19/testing>)

### I have tested positive for COVID-19: what should I do?

- **EVEN IF YOU DO NOT HAVE SYMPTOMS, IF YOU TEST POSITIVE FOR COVID-19, CONTACT YOUR RHEUMATOLOGY TEAM.**
- Contact your rheumatology team for specific advice about treatment, as decisions to pause or continue treatment should be made on a case-by-case basis.
- If you are on glucocorticoids/steroids (for e.g., prednisolone), do not stop them suddenly; seek advice from your treating team.
- Sotrovimab is a medicine available for the treatment of mild COVID-19 that is likely to progress to severe disease in people >12 years. People with AIRD may be eligible to receive sotrovimab. Please seek advice from your rheumatology team as to whether you are eligible. Please note that there are state and individual hospital-based differences in availability of sotrovimab. If you are treated with sotrovimab the current advice is that you should delay any dose of the COVID-19 vaccine for 90 days.
- Isolate according to your state government rules and tell your contacts.
- You can call the National Coronavirus Health Information Line 1800 020 080 or your state or territory public health agency for advice (see link at end of document).
- If you are acutely unwell, please call an ambulance as you would do normally in an emergency situation.
- Do not have visitors to your house whilst you are isolating.
- You can get food and other things delivered.

### My medications: will I be able to get them?

- If you are on a medicine for AIRD you may be able to get this prescription from your doctor electronically via your phone or e-mail. This is not available for all medicines.
- Call your pharmacy to ask about home delivery of medicines.
- There is currently a global shortage of tocilizumab. As a result, the supply of tocilizumab products in Australia is currently limited. If you or someone you care for uses tocilizumab, contact your rheumatologist or prescriber as soon as possible about your treatment. This shortage is expected to be resolved in early 2022. More information on the tocilizumab shortage can be found on the ARA website here; <https://rheumatology.org.au/For-Patients/Medication-Information/Tocilizumab-Shortage>

### My appointments and blood tests: what's happening?

- Some telehealth (phone or video) appointments are funded by Medicare. The reimbursements for telehealth appointments have changed on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2022. Contact your rheumatologist about this option.
- Make sure you keep in touch with your treating team so there is no interruption in prescriptions.

- If you need blood tests, Medicare rebates may allow you to have these collected at home.
- If you are on a biological or a targeted synthetic DMARD, due to the exceptional circumstances, you do not have to see your rheumatologist face to face for a repeat prescription; the review can be conducted by telehealth at the discretion of your rheumatologist.

### What else can I do to stay healthy?

- It is important to maintain healthy habits to keep your immune system as strong as possible.
- Emotional stress, lack of sleep and physical exhaustion can impact your immune system further, making you more susceptible to illness.
- Eat a healthy diet that includes plenty of fruit and vegetables.
- Ensure you exercise each day.
  - This is helpful for general physical and psychological health, but especially while physically and socially isolated.
- Get plenty of sleep—aim for eight hours every night.
- Take steps to relieve stress—try yoga, meditation or light exercise you can do at home.
- For more suggestions on how to stay healthy at home, take a look at the Healthier. Happier. website. <https://www.healthier.qld.gov.au/healthy-at-home/>
- The Australian Government website Head to Health is also a good resource for tips on maintaining good mental health and reducing stress; <https://headtohealth.gov.au/>.

As your health care providers, all members of the Australian Rheumatology Association (ARA), (rheumatologists, nurses, physiotherapists, exercise physiologists and other allied health providers), are keen to provide you with information about COVID-19.

We will aim to provide updates as new information becomes available.

For the latest advice, information and resources, please refer to Department of Health at COVID-19 resources. <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/collections/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-resources>. There are resources available in a number of languages.

The National Coronavirus Health Information Line, 1800 020 080, operates 24 hours, 7 days a week. If translation or interpreting services are needed, call 131 450. The phone number of your state or territory public health agency is available at [State and Territory Health Departments](https://www.health.gov.au/about-us/contact-us/local-state-and-territory-health-departments). <https://www.health.gov.au/about-us/contact-us/local-state-and-territory-health-departments>

The RACGP has produced a useful resource for all patients that you may find helpful. <https://www.racgp.org.au/clinical-resources/covid-19-resources/patient-resources/managing-mild-covid-19-at-home>

