

May 2020 Newsletter



Living with MS and COVID-19

Coronaviruses are a type of virus, first identified in the mid-1960s. They are named for the crown-like spikes on their surface. There are many different kinds of coronavirus, most of which aren't dangerous. COVID-19 (which stands for coronavirus disease 2019) is a newly



identified type that has caused a recent outbreak of respiratory illness. It first appeared in Wuhan, China, in December 2019. Since December, the virus has spread to nearly every continent and case numbers continue to rise. The COVID-19 pandemic poses concerns for people with MS and other autoimmune neurological conditions who are receiving disease-modifying therapies (DMTs) that act on the immune system. These treatments could potentially increase susceptibility to and severity of COVID-19 infection. However, there are a number of ways people with MS can decrease this risk.

Researchers have determined that the new coronavirus is spread through droplets released into the air when an infected person coughs or sneezes. The droplets generally do not travel more than a few feet, and they fall to the ground (or onto surfaces) in a few seconds. COVID-19 symptoms include cough, fever, shortness of breath, muscle aches, sore throat, unexplained loss of taste or smell, diarrhea and headache. Mild cases of COVID-

19 may appear similar to the flu or a bad cold. In rare cases, the virus can lead to severe respiratory problems, kidney failure, or death.

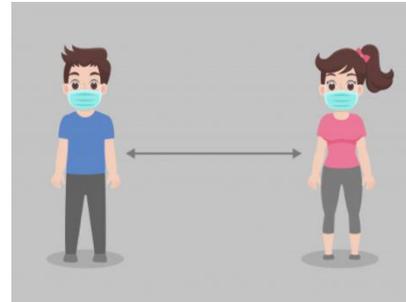


Testing for the new coronavirus typically involves obtaining a respiratory sample and shipping it to a laboratory for testing. Obtaining this type of sample is usually done by a medical professional and involves wiping the inside of the nose with a skinny swab that is long enough to reach the nasopharynx (the upper part of the throat, behind the nose). The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently [issued](#) an authorization for an at-home COVID-19 test kit, called [Pixel](#). With this test, respiratory samples can be obtained at home by swirling a cotton swab just inside the nostril. Specimens are then sent to a lab for testing. In early May, the FDA [approved](#) an at-home saliva collection test for COVID-19, which people can use to sample their own saliva and send it into a lab for results. It's important to note, the FDA also issued a warning that people should be aware of [fraudulent tests and products](#) that claim to prevent or treat the disease. Coronavirus antibody testing can check for different types of antibodies developed after exposure to the virus that causes COVID-19. This type of test is for individuals who think they may have previously had COVID-19 and do not currently have symptoms. An antibody test may not be able to determine if a person has a current infection because it can take one to three weeks after infection to make antibodies.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has issued [guidance](#) for who should be tested for the new coronavirus, but decisions about testing are made by state and local health departments or healthcare providers. Most people have mild illness and are able to recover at home without medical care. According to the CDC, testing may not be necessary in these individuals. Individuals experiencing COVID-19 symptoms and seeking testing should contact their healthcare provider or visit their state or local health department's website for more information. Although supplies of tests are increasing, it may still be difficult to find a place to get tested.

There are many ways people with MS (and the general public) can protect themselves from the new coronavirus. Because the illness spreads mainly from person to person, it's important to avoid close contact with those not living in the same household. Some ways to do this include staying at home as much as possible and reducing the number of visitors

one may have. Many people are opting to visit with friends or family by phone or video instead of in person. Working from home (whenever possible) is another way to reduce exposure. Having groceries and other necessities delivered is a good idea. If delivery is not available, it's best to do grocery shopping and essential errands during off-peak times. The CDC recommends wearing a mask or other cloth face covering when going out in public. To minimize risk, staying at least six feet away from others (social distancing) is also key. In general, it's important to avoid people who appear to be sick, if possible.



Because COVID-19 can survive for hours or even days on some surfaces, touching a contaminated surface and then touching the face is a possible way to become infected. With that in mind, frequent hand washing is imperative (or using hand sanitizer if soap and water is not available). It's essential to avoid touching one's face, especially with unwashed hands. Those needing to cough or sneeze should do so in the bend of their elbow, and make every effort to throw away used tissues immediately. It's a good idea to clean frequently touched surfaces, such as counters, doorknobs, phones and light switches frequently with disinfectant cleaners or wipes.

Currently there is no cure or vaccine for the new coronavirus. Instead, treatment focuses on managing symptoms and reducing the risk of severe complications. For mild to moderate illness, treatment is similar to the



common cold or flu. People can recover by staying home, resting, and drinking plenty of fluids. Those with severe symptoms may require hospitalization. Individuals experiencing extreme difficulty breathing may need to use a ventilator to help them breathe. If a person develops a secondary infection, such as bacterial pneumonia, they may require treatment with antibiotics. In general, people with COVID-19 should avoid others, and if they live in a home with other people, they should remain quarantined as much as possible. However, people with MS who require help or care from others may find it difficult (if not impossible) to do this. Those providing care to someone who is ill should wear a mask, regardless of MS diagnosis.



According to the National MS Society, there is [no evidence](#) that people with MS face a higher risk of the new coronavirus. However, factors inherent in living with the disease, such as attending regular medical appointments, may increase one's exposure to the virus. For this reason, people with MS should avoid unnecessary doctor visits and delay non-vital procedures whenever possible. It may be helpful to take advantage of [telehealth services](#), or stock up on medications by getting 3-month prescriptions, whenever possible.

Some MS symptoms may make people more vulnerable to COVID-19. For example, those with increased levels of disability may be less active and, as a result, suffer other health issues, such as cardiovascular disease or diabetes. Both of these conditions may increase a person's chances of contracting COVID-19. Some people with MS develop [breathing or lung problems](#). Several medications used for MS-related pain or spasticity, such as [muscle relaxants](#) and [opioid pain medications](#), can also affect breathing, making it slower and more shallow. People with lung or breathing issues due to MS may be more likely to develop complications from the new coronavirus.

As mentioned earlier, many DMTs target and weaken the immune system. Questions remain if taking these medications may lead to a higher risk of developing COVID-19 and experiencing prolonged and more severe infections. However, it's important to consider the importance of DMTs in reducing MS disease activity and the number of relapses. Stopping these medications may make MS symptoms worse and also increase an individual's vulnerability to severe infections. MS relapses often require treatment with steroids (which further suppress the immune system) and/or a trip to the clinic or hospital (which would increase one's exposure). Those living with MS should discuss the benefits and risks of DMTs in the current climate with their treating neurologist in order to determine the ideal treatment choice in a given situation.



The current pandemic is stressful for everyone in different ways. Adding to this, MS is a stressful condition on its own. Its chronic, unpredictable nature and unpleasant symptoms can wreak havoc in the lives of those living with the disease. As discussed in our [April 2019 newsletter](#), stress is often associated with more severe MS symptoms and can contribute to flares. It's important for people with MS to try and manage any anxiety or

stress they may be feeling by reaching out to healthcare providers and other [resources](#) for coping strategies when they can't manage it on their own.

Even though most people recover from the new coronavirus, it is essential for people with MS to take the risks associated with the virus seriously and contact a doctor as soon as possible if they develop COVID-19 symptoms. The best way to remain safe is to reduce the chances of contracting the virus by following all hygiene and other safety guidelines. There is no evidence that people with MS are more likely to get COVID-19 than anyone else. However, some DMTs may increase the risk of infections, including COVID-19. Individuals with MS should discuss their treatment plan in the context of the current pandemic, as well as the best strategies to avoid getting sick, with their healthcare team.



Researchers are working at an unprecedented pace to better understand the new coronavirus, as well as determine ways to prevent and treat it. For those interested, Multiple Sclerosis News Today hosts a [web page](#) with new information related to COVID-19 testing and potential treatments in development that is updated weekly. The core of ACP's mission is to facilitate research on matters that impact people living with MS. We are leading the investigation in the MS community gathering important data related to the current pandemic through iConquerMS (see "[Using Data to Combat COVID-19](#)") to help everyone affected by MS navigate these unprecedented circumstances and live the best life possible as we continue to work toward a cure for MS.