



12<sup>th</sup> March 2020

*Please note that some of this information may change as our understanding of Covid-19 increases. For the most up to date version please see the ILFA website [www.ilfa.ie](http://www.ilfa.ie)*

## **Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) - Advice for patients from the Irish Lung Fibrosis Association**

Covid-19 (Coronavirus) is a new virus that was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. The family of coronaviruses include viruses that cause 'colds' but also some viruses that cause very serious diseases with a high mortality rate like SARS and MERS. As this is a novel (new) virus people do not have any immunity so large numbers of patients are becoming infected in a short period of time. Over the last few weeks the spread of the virus has become a worldwide concern as the number of people who have developed an acute respiratory viral infection and have tested positive for the Covid-19 virus is increasing in many countries including Ireland.

While there is a lot of good, factual, evidence-based information emerging about the new virus, there is also a lot of misinformation in circulation that can lead to heightened anxiety and worry. It is important to use trusted sources of information to inform yourself about the current news and developments relating to Covid-19. Some useful and reliable websites are included below. Here, we hope to provide you with useful information and practical advice to help you stay safe.

### **How does the virus spread?**

The virus is spread from person to person. Covid-19 spreads directly via tiny respiratory droplets when someone infected with the virus coughs or sneezes close to you, or indirectly if you touch your face after coming in contact with contaminated surfaces, such as handrails and door handles. The Covid-19 virus enters the body when it comes in contact with your mucous membranes through your mouth, nose, or eyes. This is why it is so important to wash your hands frequently and keep a distance away from people this is called social distancing. People who have been exposed to the virus may be contagious before they themselves have any symptoms. This is one reason the virus is spreading so much.

Countries including Taiwan, Singapore and China that have employed strict hygiene measures and social distancing, isolated symptomatic cases and curtailed the movement of people have successfully reduced the number of cases. Unfortunately throughout Europe (including Ireland), US and Iran the number of cases continues to increase.

### **Who is at risk of catching COVID19?**

Covid-19 is contagious and can affect anyone, and this has significant implications for the individuals infected with the virus and their close contacts, and also for public health and healthcare systems. The majority of people who have tested positive for the virus so far have developed mild symptoms and have recovered relatively quickly in an average of two weeks. People with pre-existing health problems and older people are not at any greater risk of getting the disease but they certainly are at significantly higher risk of developing severe disease and needing to be hospitalized. Patients have become critically ill with pneumonia, respiratory failure and have died after contracting Covid-19.

Those at particular risk of developing severe disease include older adults, people with underlying medical conditions like pulmonary (lung fibrosis) and cigarette smokers. However young patients without any health conditions have died as a result of this infection. Healthcare workers are also at increased risk of developing a severe infection. However the majority of patients do recovery completely.

### **What are the symptoms?**

The symptoms of Covid-19 viral infection most commonly include;

- a cough
- fever - high temperature
- fatigue (tiredness)
- headache
- runny nose
- sore throat
- shortness of breath or breathing difficulties can develop and may indicate more severe disease

It is important to remember that if you have these symptoms, it does not mean that you automatically have Covid-19. Influenza (flu) and the common cold are also present in Ireland and it is likely that some people with these symptoms will have a cold or flu rather than Covid-19. There are laboratory tests available to identify the influenza and Covid-19 viruses using nose and throat swabs from people with symptoms

## **What should I do if I have symptoms?**

If you develop a fever, cough and difficulty breathing **or** symptoms listed above, you should seek medical advice and telephone your General Practitioner (GP) or hospital emergency department. The HSE have a helpful website and a telephone helpline. 1850-24-1850. Different areas have different public health service numbers to offer guidance. Please do not attend your GP surgery, pharmacy or hospital for outpatient appointments if you have symptoms. First telephone to get advice and be directed to the safest type of assessment.

Also please let your doctor know if you have had contact with someone who has tested positive for the virus, someone who has symptoms, or someone who has recently travelled abroad to a high-risk area.

Let your GP know what your symptoms are and tell them that you have lung fibrosis; they will advise you on the next steps to take. You should avoid contact with other people to help prevent the spread of disease.

## **What should I do to stay safe?**

It is important for everyone to follow the safety advice from public health experts to protect themselves and their close contacts to prevent the spread of viral infections. If you have a serious health condition such as lung fibrosis, it is especially important that you and your family members take precautions to avoid getting the infection because your symptoms could be more severe.

As the virus starts to circulate more in the community the chance of picking up the virus from a person who has been exposed but doesn't know it will increase. For this reason everyone should limit contact with other people (including people they know) as much as possible. Always ensure you and everyone around you is maintaining good hand washing and following the other precautions.

Public health experts advise people to;

- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm running water for at least 20 seconds or use hand sanitiser gel regularly to help kill viruses that may be on your hands. It is a good idea to soap your hands and nails thoroughly before scrubbing them under the tap. Soap kills the virus.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a clean disposable tissue when you cough or sneeze. If you do not have a tissue cough or sneeze into your bent elbow. Put used tissues into a closed bin immediately and wash your hands.
- Don't touch your eyes, nose or mouth if your hands are not clean
- Avoid contact with people who are unwell
- Stay at home and seek medical advice if you feel unwell
- Avoid public places and large crowds if possible

- Avoid unnecessary travel to areas where Covid-19 is reported
- Stay informed on the latest developments about Covid-19 using the websites below

Follow the advice given by the HSE and your healthcare professional Good hand hygiene is vitally important to prevent the virus spreading. You should wash your hands;

- after coughing or sneezing
- before, during and after preparing food
- before eating
- after using the toilet
- when caring for the sick
- when hands are dirty
- after handling animals or animal waste

ILFA's medical experts issue additional advice to vulnerable patients with lung fibrosis (\* This reflects specific medical opinion and may not correspond with HSE or Public Health Advice)

- Avoid gatherings of people including cinemas, theatres, restaurants and gyms/clubs
- Avoid contact with people who are sick
- Keep at least 1-2 meters away from other people even if they are not unwell
- Avoid all non-essential travel and do not travel to countries with known high incidence of disease
- Avoid (as much as practical) public transportation
- When you do need to use public transportation or be in a public space, ensure that you stay at least a meter or more from other people
- If you can work from home take that option

**In short, we recommend that you limit contact with all other people including family and friends as much as is possible. Following these precautions will help you to stay safer and will also help the community by helping to limit the transmission of this serious disease**

### **Trusted websites for up to date factual information about Covid-19**

- Health Service Executive (HSE) [www.hse.ie](http://www.hse.ie)
- Health Protection Surveillance Centre [www.hpsc.ie](http://www.hpsc.ie)
- Department of Health [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie)
- World Health Organisation [www.who.net](http://www.who.net)
- European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control [www.ecdc.europa.eu](http://www.ecdc.europa.eu)