

INFORMATION ON CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) FOR PEOPLE WITH SPINAL CORD INJURY

This document is current as at 19/03/20 and will be updated if there are significant changes to its content.

Please note: This document should not replace other information available from State or Commonwealth Governments but aims to provide some information specifically relevant to people with Spinal Cord Injury. We encourage you to review further general information about COVID-19 in Australia at this website <https://www.health.gov.au/health-topics/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov>

What is Coronavirus (also known as COVID-19)?

Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a new virus that is occurring in humans for the first time. It originated in China but has spread around the world over the past few months including Australia. Please see later in this document for further general information on COVID-19.

Am I more at risk of problems from COVID-19 because I have a Spinal Cord Injury?

At this stage, we do not have good information on the specific impacts of the COVID-19 virus on people with spinal cord injury.

If you have a tetraplegia or high paraplegia level injury and have existing problems with your lungs or reduced breathing capacity then you may be at higher risk of having more severe problems related to COVID-19. Your Spinal Clinician or Local Medical Officer can help assess your personal level of risk, and this can now be done via teleconferencing/telehealth – please enquire in your local health district.

What should I do to prevent getting the virus?

You should be very alert for any signs or symptoms including sore throat, cough, fever, breathing difficulty not only in yourself but also in people you are in close contact with (e.g., family, friends and your support providers). You should avoid further contact with people who have these symptoms, if possible.

As for everyone in the community, very good hand and sneeze/cough hygiene is one of the best defences against most viruses, including this one.

You should:

- Cover your mouth to cough or sneeze, dispose of tissues, and use alcohol-based hand sanitiser.
- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water for 20 seconds, before and after eating, and after going to the toilet.
- Have your support providers (and anyone else entering your home) wash their hands when they arrive at your home and each time prior to touching or assisting you with any tasks.
- Regularly clean and disinfect the surfaces that are touched in your home to prevent the spread of infection or ask your support providers to do this on a regular basis.

- Use disinfecting wipes on items that are frequently touched including your phone, doorknobs, refrigerator handle, wheelchair controls, pushrim and remote controls.
- If you are unwell you should avoid contact with others.
- For those at higher risk (i.e., people with tetraplegia and high-level paraplegia or other underlying health conditions) should consider higher levels of contact avoidance.

As is the recommendation for all Australians, those people with spinal cord injury at lesser risk should at a minimum, now be practising social distancing (not closer than 1.5 metres to other people), avoid handshaking, hugging and kissing and other close contact.

You should avoid gatherings and events where the virus could be more easily spread and limit any non-essential visitors. You should also limit non-essential visiting outside your home.

You should ensure that any family member, friends or support providers do not visit you if they or a member of their household, have travelled overseas within the last 14 days.

You should stop smoking as there is evidence that smoking makes illness with COVID-19 worse.

If you are well, and not in a high-risk environment, you do not need to wear a surgical mask.

For people with tetraplegia, an Inspiratory Muscle Trainer used routinely promotes stronger respiratory muscles and improves lung function volumes. Please contact your physiotherapist or Spinal Cord Injury Service for more information and a personalised respiratory program.

What should I do if I think I may have contracted the COVID-19 virus or become unwell?

If you have any symptoms or signs, such as a sore throat, cough, fever, breathing difficulty, then you should contact your doctor or local hospital to see whether you need to be tested for COVID-19.

Remember most cases of the virus will not be severe, however, if you are concerned that you are becoming unwell or are having any breathing difficulty you should call your local hospital to alert them, then call an ambulance and attend your local hospital.

Review the online resource “What to do when you are hospitalised – a guide for people with spinal cord injury” to help plan your SCI-specific needs during an admission. Consider developing a personalised care plan that details what equipment and support you need for your daily routine, such as personal care needs, medications list, bowel care program, bladder routine and catheters, skin protection and pressure injury prevention, respiratory function, mobility equipment and AD Emergency Treatment card.

If you have weakness of the expiratory muscles as a result of your spinal cord injury (people with tetraplegia or high-level paraplegia), and experience difficulty clearing secretions from your lungs, you may need assistance to clear secretions.

What should I do if my carer or support provider contracts the virus or is unwell and cannot attend to my support needs?

If your carer or any of your support providers are unwell, they should not be assisting you.

If you have not done so already, you should contact your support provider and ask them what plans they have for replacement of support workers in the current situation.

You should think ahead about what alternative solutions there are if you do not have enough support available. If you have no alternatives you should present to your local hospital.

If you do require admission to hospital make sure that the hospital staff are aware of any special care or equipment needs that you have e.g. pressure care and appropriate shower chair and mattress etc.

Further useful information can be found at National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) - [Coronavirus information](#).

What else can I do?

It is more important than usual to have a flu vaccination this year. This should include your contacts and carers if at all possible.

If you are uncertain, please contact your GP or your local spinal cord injury unit or community team for further advice. Please notify your spinal cord service if you are admitted to hospital with COVID-19 or any other problem.

Where can I find other information?

Spinal Outreach Service (NSW) - [IMT Patient Handout](#)

Shepherd Centre (USA) - [Q&A: Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)](#)

Appendix 1

General Information about Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Why is it important?

Because it is occurring in humans for the first time, we have no immunity to it and there are not yet any vaccines available. There are no specific treatments available at present.

How is it spread?

The COVID-19 virus is most likely spread through close contact with an infectious person, contact with droplets from an infected person's cough or sneeze (within 2 metres or closed space) and touching objects or surfaces (like doorknobs or tables) that have cough or sneeze droplets from an infected person, and then touching your mouth, nose or eyes.

What are the symptoms?

The most common symptoms are dry cough, fever, sore throat, tiredness and in more serious cases, pneumonia and breathing difficulty.

How serious is it?

This seems to occur most often in the elderly, who are frail and have other medical or breathing problems but it can also affect younger people with serious other medical or breathing conditions.

What is the current situation in Australia?

It is important to remember that most people who have COVID-19 in Australia so far contracted it in another country or have had contact with someone who has travelled to another country and contracted it there (e.g., China, Iran, Italy, USA). Australia is well prepared for COVID-19 and has strong public health measures that are now being put in place to protect people and limit the spread of the disease in community as much as possible.

We encourage you to review further general information about COVID-19 in Australia [here](#) or NSW Health [website](#) which will have updates related to NSW