**Advice for Patients with Autoimmune Hepatitis during the**

**COVID-19 Pandemic**

**Summary Recommendations**

Based on expert opinion from NZ and overseas we are recommending:

* Do not stop your medication
* Follow isolation advice carefully
* Have the influenza vaccination

**For more detail, tips and FAQ’s see below:**

**Introduction**

Most patients with autoimmune hepatitis need to take immunosuppressant drugs to avoid a flare of their disease. The most common immunosuppressant drugs are prednisone and azathioprine. Other immunosuppressant drugs are listed later in this information sheet. People who are on immunosuppressant drugs are considered to be at even higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19.

During the current and evolving COVID-19 pandemic we understand that patients who suffer from autoimmune hepatitis will have considerable anxiety relating to their condition and medications. We hope therefore to be able to provide some advice at the current time.

The current recommendations from the NZ government are that patients with compromised immunity stay at home as much as they can. This means:

* Staying at home
* Minimal contact with other people including family and friends
* Asking others to help with shopping etc.
* Standard precautions with respect to personal hygiene

This advice applies for all NZ COVID Alert Levels 2 and above.

**Top tips for patients with autoimmune hepatitis**

1. Please be aware that although hospitals are undergoing significant reorganisation and changes to our standard delivery of care, we will be doing everything we can to keep you safe and well during the pandemic.
* To this end **all** clinics at this stage will be done via telephone and you will be contacted regarding this if you have an upcoming appointment.
1. We will be happy to give advice about how often to do regular blood tests. Please find more information below in the FAQ section.
2. **DO NOT STOP** your medications. This is because:
* We do not know for certain that these increase your risk of COVID-19 infection or severe disease.
* The risks of stopping medications include high risk of rejection and hospitalisation. This will put you at higher risk than continuing your medications.
1. Ensure you have a good supply of medication to self-isolate .
2. Arrange with your GP to receive the annual influenza (Flu) vaccination (this is available free to all patients with a chronic disease).
3. Contact your local Gastroenterology team the phone or email helpline if you have any health issues you want to discuss. This is best done through our Nurse GastroClinicNurse@waikatodhb.health.nz .
4. Wash your hands frequently and avoid touching your face; this goes for everyone.
5. Work from home, avoid non-essential travel & contact with people who are currently unwell.
6. Quit smoking as this increases the risk and severity of COVID19 infection and avoid NSAIDs (e.g. ibuprofen).
7. Government guidelines on self-isolation and social distancing are changing rapidly so please visit [www.covid19.govt.nz](http://www.covid19.govt.nz/) to keep up to date. (If you are unclear on your level of risk, contact your local transplant helpline for further advice) .
8. ***Try to stay connected using social media or simply through the phone.*** At times of stress, we cope better in company and with support. Try and keep regular contact with your family and friends. It’s good to connect with people on social media but avoid reading or engaging with content that might cause unnecessary stress to you or others.
9. ***Avoid information overload***. Only look at reliable sources of information about coronavirus that are updated regularly.  Only share content from reliable sources.
10. ***Keep a routine.*** It is a good idea to stick to your daily routine as much as you can. You may also like to focus on the things you can do if you feel able to including partaking in activities and hobbies that you enjoy.
11. ***Keep healthy*** and maintain a healthy lifestyle. Eating a diet including plenty of fruit and vegetables, taking regular exercise and getting a good night’s sleep will help your immune system to deal with any infection.
12. If you develop a cough, fever or flu-like symptoms **you should follow the government's recommendations about self-isolation and household quarantine. If you are on immunosuppression (see below) contact the transplant service for advice. If you feel you cannot cope with your symptoms at home, or your condition gets worse, or your symptoms do not get better after 7 days, then use the free government helpline on 0800 779997 or Healthline on 0800 358 5453. For a medical emergency dial 111. Do not turn up to your GP practice unannounced.**
13. Take care of yourself but also be kind and considerate to others in these difficult times

**Frequently Asked Questions**

**Q1. Am I immunosuppressed?**

Any patient with autoimmune hepatitis on any of the following medications would be considered to be immunosuppressed and should be following appropriate guidance.

* Prednisone
* Azathioprine / 6-mercaptopurine / thioguanine
* Mycophenolate
* Tacrolimus
* Ciclosporin

**Q2. Are there additional “high risk” things I should consider?**

Yes, if you fulfil any other of the following criteria we would recommend complete self-isolation:- people with suppressed immune systems due to medication, age, or as a part of their illnesses, may be at -higher risk of both getting COVID-19 and having a more severe reaction.

Also if you have added conditions such as diabetes (high HbA1C), obesity, heart disease, kidney disease and anemia this may increase your risk.

**Q3. If I am self-isolating and unable to work do I require a medical certificate?**

If you require evidence to support the fact that you have medical issues requiring you to self-isolate please get in touch with your GP or our gastro nurse.

**Q4. Should I receive the pneumonia vaccine?**

The pneumococcal vaccination (Pneumovax**®**23) is protective against a group of bacteria which can cause pneumonia. In many parts of the world it is recommended 5 yearly for the elderly or immunosuppressed patients, but in NZ it is not publically funded. At the current time we would recommend discussing this vaccination with your GP, the cost is around $60

**Q5. What about my blood tests?**

If you have had your autoimmune hepatitis diagnosed recently, your medications have been changed or we have had recent concerns about your health, regular blood tests will continue to be an important way of monitoring your disease. If your autoimmune hepatitis was diagnosed some time ago and you are stable, it may be possible to delay routine blood tests and do them every 3 months. We are happy to give you advice regarding this matter. If blood tests are required we would recommend speaking to your local laboratory to ensure they are open as normal and trying to visit at a quiet time to limit your exposure.

**Q6. I work in an “essential service” what should I do?**

A number of people with autoimmune hepatitis will work in essential services which need to continue during the COVID-19 pandemic. If you are on immunosuppressant medication we would support working from home and you should discuss this with your manager. If this cannot be possible then avoiding contact with employees and the public, cleaning down work stations and maintaining meticulous personal hygiene are recommended.

Ministry of health – [www.covid19.govt.nz](http://www.covid19.govt.nz)

American association for the study of liver diseases- [AASLD advice for providers](https://www.aasld.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/AASLD-COVID19-ClinicalInsights-3.23.2020-FINAL-v2.pdf)

British society of Gastroenterology <https://www.bsg.org.uk/covid-19-advice/bsg-and-basl-covid-19-advice-for-healthcare-professionals-in-gastroenterology-and-hepatology/>

*From the Gastroenterology Team, Waikato Hospital, March 2020*