

# COVID-19 Advice for People with Cancer

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Note: The information here was prepared in April 2022. As advice may change with time, please consult the hse.ie webpages (see links below) for the most up to date information.

## 1 COVID-19 and Cancer

As restrictions are lifted and society reopens, many people still remain vulnerable to severe disease from COVID-19. This includes certain people with a cancer diagnosis, including many of those receiving cancer treatment. The virus that causes COVID-19 is still circulating in Ireland and internationally and there is a risk you could catch or pass on the virus, even if you are fully vaccinated and have had booster doses.

While COVID-19 can make anyone seriously ill, the risk is higher for certain groups of people, including many people with a diagnosis of cancer.

Further details on the conditions that can put someone at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19 are available here: <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/COVID19/people-at-higher-risk/>

Certain types of cancer and cancer treatment can affect your immune system. This can mean that the COVID-19 vaccine may not work as well for you as it does for people whose immune systems are working normally. This is why an extra dose of the COVID-19 vaccine is recommended for many people on cancer treatment. It is also why you may be advised to get a PCR test if you have symptoms of COVID-19, and why your doctor may consider offering you treatment with new COVID-19 medication if your COVID-19 test is positive. There may also be times during your cancer journey, e.g. in the weeks before an operation, where you are advised to take extra precautions to reduce your chances of catching COVID-19.

This document is intended to provide information on:

- Extra steps you can take to reduce your risk of getting COVID-19 - While no situation is risk free, there are simple and effective actions you can take to protect yourself and others around you.
- What to do if you get symptoms of COVID-19, including getting tested and accessing new treatments.
- Steps you can take to manage stress caused by the ongoing pandemic.

## 2 Reduce your Risk

If you are at higher risk from COVID-19, consider taking the following measures to protect yourself:

- Ensure you have had all recommended doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, including your additional dose and booster vaccination(s). While the vaccine won't always prevent you from

catching COVID-19, it will greatly reduce the chances of you becoming seriously ill or being hospitalised from COVID-19.

- Continue to follow any advice you may have been given by your doctor.
- Consider continuing to wear a facemask in public spaces. Although it is no longer mandatory, wearing a facemask on public transport and in healthcare settings is still recommended for everybody, and is particularly important for people at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19.
- Where possible, avoid crowds and poorly ventilated spaces. If you need to spend time in crowded or enclosed spaces, minimise the time spent in these environments.
- Continue to practice physical distancing in so far as possible.
- Ventilate your home regularly by opening windows and doors to let fresh air in.
- Continue to practice basic hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene. Cough or sneeze into a clean tissue, or into your elbow if you don't have a tissue, and then dispose of the tissue promptly and wash your hands thoroughly. Wash your hands regularly and avoid touching your face where possible.

Further information on public health advice in place right now is available here

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3361b-public-health-updates/>

If someone you live with tests positive for COVID-19 and you have an underlying condition that puts you at a high/very high risk of severe COVID-19 disease, you should monitor yourself closely for the development of any symptoms. If you are currently on treatment for cancer, you should let your team know that someone you live with has COVID-19, as you may need a COVID-19 test before your next treatment.

If you develop any symptoms of COVID-19, you should get a PCR test as soon as possible. If you test positive, your doctor may assess you to see if you would be suitable for treatment with the new anti-viral medications for COVID-19 (see below).

### 3 If you have symptoms

The most common symptoms of COVID-19 (coronavirus) are:

- fever (high temperature - 38 degrees Celsius or above) - including having chills
- dry cough
- fatigue (tiredness)

COVID-19 symptoms can be like symptoms of cold, flu or hay fever.

If you develop symptoms, self-isolate immediately and wear a facemask if you need to be near other people. Follow the advice at <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/COVID19/symptoms/overview/>

Testing is no longer required for most otherwise healthy people with symptoms of COVID-19.

However, a **COVID-19 PCR test is recommended** for people who:

- are age 55 or older and have not had a COVID-19 vaccine booster dose
- have a high-risk medical condition, such as cancer
- have a weak immune system (immunocompromised)
- live in the same household as a person who has a weak immune system or provide support or care for them
- are pregnant
- are a healthcare worker

You can arrange a PCR test using the following HSE link:

<https://covid19test.healthservice.ie/hse-self-referral/>

If you are unable to book a test using the HSE portal, please phone your GP or hospital consultant to get a COVID-19 PCR test.

If you are experiencing symptoms and have concerns for your health, please contact your GP without delay.

## 4 Treatments for COVID-19

There are new medicines for early treatment of some people with COVID-19. The HSE has published guidance on the use of these medicines. Most people who catch COVID-19 will not need these medicines.

Further information can be found here:

<https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/covid19/symptoms/treatments-for-covid-19/>

If you test positive for COVID-19 and are at high risk of severe illness from COVID-19, please contact your GP or hospital team who will assess whether this treatment is right for you.

## 5 Managing Stress

All change is stressful, even positive change. After two years of living with restrictions, it is important to realise that it will take time to adapt to society re-opening. Here are some suggestions for managing the change:

**Go at your own pace** – with the lifting of restrictions, take things at your own pace and make decisions about what is best for you. Take things one step at a time. Avoiding the things that make us anxious can feel like the easier option, but it can make it harder to face our fears in the longer term. Try to set yourself small but manageable goals. Start with activities that feel achievable, like meeting a friend or family member for a coffee outside, and gradually build from there.

**Be informed** – there is a lot of information available on COVID-19, including mixed messaging which can feel overwhelming and confusing. Try to limit how much information you consume and use reliable and trusted sources such as HSE.ie and the Irish Cancer Society.

**Discuss plans or changes freely** – before socialising with others, talk with them about the plans and find out what is comfortable for everyone.

**Make time for yourself** - being able to see more of our friends and family and visit places is exciting but it can also be overwhelming. Make sure to find regular time for yourself to relax. This can include activities such as exercise or spending time outside.

**Challenge unhelpful thoughts** – it is natural for us all to worry from time to time, but our anxious thoughts can be unhelpful. Journaling your thoughts may help to alleviate some of your worries. It is easy to feel isolated or lonely when we are struggling. Opening up to a person we trust can be helpful, whether it is a friend or family member, a GP or an organisation's helpline or online forum.

<https://www2.hse.ie/wellbeing/mental-health/covid-19/minding-your-mental-health-during-the-coronavirus-outbreak.html>

**Set a routine** - during the periods of lockdown and restrictions, we developed new routines. Are there any routines that you would like to continue? Something as simple as going to bed and waking up at the same time each day or putting time aside for exercise can help.

**Be present** - When there is lots of change happening, we can worry about the future and the past. Instead, try to shift your focus to the present – try not to dwell on "what ifs" or what was "supposed" to happen. Relaxation, mindfulness or getting outside and enjoying nature are all good ways to help you focus on the present.

## 6 Useful Links

HSE website <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/COVID19/>

HSE website <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/COVID-19/people-at-higher-risk/overview/>

Irish Cancer Society <https://www.cancer.ie>

COVID-19 Guidance for People at Risk of Severe Disease on Reducing Risk of COVID-19 Infection  
<https://bit.ly/3t007if>

HPSC Guidance <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/peopleatincreasedriskofsevereillness/otherstincreasedriskofsevereillness/Information%20for%20people%20at%20the%20highest%20risk%20from%20COVID-19.pdf>