FAQ For Transplant Patients

Q: What is the 2019 Novel Coronavirus?

A: The 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a new respiratory virus first identified in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China. This virus was not previously known to cause human illness until the recent outbreak. It is believed that the virus was initially transmitted to humans from a wild animal. Human-to-human transmission is now the most common route of transmission.

Q: What are the symptoms of COVID-19?

A: Similar to many viral respiratory illnesses, the symptoms of the virus mimic the common cold and include mild to severe respiratory illness with fever, cough and difficulty breathing.

Symptoms may appear between two to 14 days after exposure to the virus. Also, be mindful that we are in flu season and pollen counts are high, so there are many other causes for upper respiratory symptoms that are much more common than COVID-19.

Q: How does COVID-19 spread?

A: As with any viral respiratory illness, COVID-19 can spread from person to person through stool, blood, urine, and small respiratory droplets, which are dispersed when a person with the virus coughs or sneezes and then are inhaled by another person. These droplets can also land on objects and surfaces around the infected person. Other people catch the virus by touching these objects, and then touching their eyes, nose, or mouth.

Q: How do I protect myself from getting COVID-19?

A: There is currently no vaccine to prevent COVID-19. The best way to prevent the spread of germs is proper hand hygiene and cough etiquette. Below are some other tips:

- Avoid close contact with people who are sick.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Stay home when you are sick.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash and perform hand hygiene immediately.
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces using a regular household cleaning spray or wipe.

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• Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after going to the bathroom, before eating, and after blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing. If soap and water are not readily available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol. Always wash hands with soap and water if hands are visibly dirty.

We strongly recommend avoiding large public gatherings for transplant patients.

**Q: How long does COVID-19 survive on surfaces?**

**A:** It is not certain how long the virus that causes COVID-19 survives on surfaces, but it seems to behave like other coronaviruses. Studies suggest that coronaviruses may persist on surfaces for a few hours or up to several days. If you think a surface may be infected, clean it with simple disinfectant to kill the virus and protect yourself and others.

**Q: Should I be concerned about contracting the coronavirus?**

**A:** If you are not in an area where the coronavirus is spreading, or if you have not traveled from one of those key areas, or have not been in close contact with someone who has felt, or is feeling unwell, your chances of getting the novel virus are currently low.

Transplant Patients are at a higher risk of contracting any illness. We advise you to avoid crowds, public (indoor) areas and being around others who are “sick” just as you would during flu season. If you need to go out into public or crowded areas, wear a mask if possible and wash your hands frequently.

If you have a job that that exposes you to the public, please follow the above precautions.

**Q: How does COVID-19 compare to other coronaviruses?**

**A:** COVID-19 originated in China and has rapidly spread to multiple other countries including South Korea, Japan, Italy, Iran and many others. So far most of the cases reported in the US have been travel related, but cases of person-to-person transmission have been reported in some areas of the country and are still increasing.

**Q: Is it safe to receive a package from any areas with confirmed cases of the coronavirus?**

**A:** Yes. The likelihood of an infected person contaminating commercial goods is extremely low and the risk of catching the virus from a package that has been moved, traveled and exposed to different conditions and temperatures is also extremely low.

**Q: Is the CDC the only place that can test for COVID-19?**

**A:** Houston Methodist Emergency Department must send the test to the local health department who then sends the test to the CDC for confirmation. Results take 2-4 days. We are developing our own testing for COVID-19 and we will draw duplicate samples on patients to validate a test. However, at the present time, confirmatory tests must be performed by the CDC. Currently, companies are working to develop and implement additional testing options. In addition, Houston Methodist is working to create mobile testing sites which will give patients more options for being tested.

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Q: When should I be tested for COVID-19?

A: In accordance with the CDC, patients who are experiencing symptoms such as fever, cough, or lower respiratory symptoms, or shortness of breath AND have potential exposure from traveling or close contact with someone who has traveled (to China, South Korea, Italy, Iran, Japan) OR contact with someone who has been diagnosed with COVID-19 should be tested. Please let your physician or coordinator know if you have traveled ANYWHERE outside the US.

The CDC has issued the following additional specific travel guidance related to COVID-19 (3/8/20): people at higher risk should avoid cruise travel, and non-essential air travel. ALL transplant patients are considered at higher risk.

We recommend that transplant patients avoid ANY unnecessary travel at this time.

Q: Where can someone be tested for COVID-19?

A. Currently samples may be collected at any Houston Methodist Emergency Department and will be sent to Houston Health Department and CDC for confirmatory testing. If you live outside the Houston Area, please contact your local Emergency Department or Local Health Department for possible testing areas.

Q: What is the role of telemedicine?

A: Telemedicine is a key strategy for screening and treating patients. HM Virtual Urgent Care is ready to screen patients 24/7, and eVisits are ready to screen patients from 7 a.m.-7 p.m.

While we cannot test through virtual visits, we can help keep patients who do not need COVID-19 screening out of the emergency rooms.

We are working to implement virtual visits through the Transplant Department. We will send additional information as soon as possible.

Q: Can I still travel?

A: If you’re planning to travel internationally, first check the CDC and World Health Organization websites for updates and recommendations. Look for any health advisories that may be in place where you plan to travel.

At this time, we do not recommend any unnecessary travel for transplant patients. We strongly discourage participation in large social gatherings. If you need to travel or go out in public, we recommend you wear a mask and perform frequent hand washing.
Q: Do all patients who test positive for COVID-19 need to be in the hospital?

A: Patients who have no symptoms or mild symptoms should remain at home in quarantine for at least 14 days due to the incubation period.

Q: Does Houston Methodist Hospital have any restrictions on visitors on our campuses?

A: With the exception of extraordinary circumstances, all inpatients should be limited to two visitors at a time during the course of their stay in the hospital.

We do not recommend visitors under 18 at this time. We do understand there will be exceptions, so if you have concerns, please discuss with a unit manager or patient liaison.

Patients in contact isolation are restricted to one visitor during the course of their stay.

Patients scheduled for outpatient procedures are asked to limit the number of accompanying family members.

- Surgical masks are to be used for all patients and guests who have respiratory symptoms.

As always, prevention is our strongest defense against viral infections. To prevent infectious diseases and viruses, please remember to:

- Practice good hygiene
- Use alcohol-based sanitizers when soap and water are not available
- Use disposable tissues when coughing and sneezing; dispose of carefully and promptly. If tissues are not available, direct your cough or sneeze into the crook of your arm/sleeve.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces
- Avoid large gatherings, public areas and close contact with anyone who has cold or flu-like symptoms
- Avoid live animal markets and contact with any farm, or wild animals.
- Thoroughly cook meat and eggs before consumption
- Maintain healthy habits that support your immune system


For ongoing updates of countries included within each alert level, please reference the CDC’s website. We appreciate your understanding in this matter, as the safety of our patients and our employees are at the heart of our mission. For urgent COVID-19 questions, call the Houston Methodist hotline number at 346.356.2222 or email your questions to askCOVID@houstonmethodist.org.

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