Dear IBD Patient,

I am writing to let you know that the L&D, British Society of Gastroenterology and NHS have been giving particular thought to patients with IBD during this coronavirus pandemic and the extra steps that each of you could take to keep you well.

**Note that all patients should still continue their current medications and attend for infusions of biologics no matter what category they are in. Essentially we are still recommending you continue with your present medication, as changes to it could risk flares, which in turn may increase your risks of picking up the infection and reduce your body’s ability to clear it.**

As of 22 March 2020, there are three levels of action considered appropriate for all people, including children, who are at very high risk of severe illness from coronavirus (COVID-19) because of an underlying health condition, and for their family, friends and carers. This can be accessed at https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19#what-is-shielding:

The three levels of action are:

1. Shielding [for high risk groups, see below]

2. Stringent social distancing [for moderate risk groups]

3. Social distancing [for everyone]

Shielding is a measure to protect extremely vulnerable people by minimising interaction between those who are extremely vulnerable and others. This means that those who are extremely vulnerable should not leave their homes, and within their homes should minimise all non-essential contact with other members of their household.

It is worth making two general comments:

1. If a person halves the number of personal contacts, they can expect to halve the risk of getting infection
2. Common sense suggests that there is a component of individual responsibility: guidance will not apply to every situation and if you, personally, think that self-isolation is a sensible precaution, then you should do so

The rest of this letter aims to clarify some of the additional National recommendations **specific** to IBD patients. The British Society of Gastroenterology (BSG) set up as UK-wide COVID-19 working group and on the 23rd of March released the following recommendations based on stratifying IBD patients into high, moderate and low risk groups.

**Please read the following guidance carefully to determine which group you are in (High, Moderate or Low risk) and follow the advice.**

**High Risk**

**Action: shielding**

1. Any IBD patient aged more than 70 years **and** on any of the following drugs: Ustekinumab ,Vedolizumab, Methotrexate, Infliximab, Adalimumab, Golimumab, Azathioprine, Mercaptopurine, Tacrolimus, Ciclosporin, Tofacitinib
2. Any IBD patient of **any** age who has **any** of the following conditions: respiratory problems, cardiac problems, hypertension or diabetes **and** is on: Ustekinumab ,Vedolizumab, Methotrexate, Infliximab, Adalimumab, Golimumab, Azathioprine, Mercaptopurine, Tacrolimus, Ciclosporin, Tofacitinib.
3. IBD patients of any age **and** who meet one or more of the following criteria:
4. on steroids (prednisolone) of more than 20mg /day (only whilst on this dose)
5. recently started biologics (e.g Ustekinumab,Vedolizumab, infliximab, adalimumab, golimumab) within the last 6 weeks
6. have moderate to severely active disease despite immunosupression/biologics
7. have short gut syndrome
8. are on parenteral nutrition

**Medium Risk**

**Action: Stringent social distancing**

Patients of any age on the following medications:

Ustekinumab ,Vedolizumab, Methotrexate, Infliximab, Adalimumab, Golimumab, Azathioprine, Mercaptopurine, Tacrolimus, Ciclosporin, Tofacitinib

**Lowest risk**

**Action: Social distancing**

Patients of any age on the following medications:

5ASA (Pentasa, asacol, mezavent, octasa, salofalk), Rectal therapies, orally administered topically acting steroids (budesonide, beclometasone), therapies for bile acid diarrhoea (Colestyramine, colesevalam, colestipol), anti-diarrhoeals (loperamide), antibiotics for bacterial overgrowth or perianal disease.

No specific recommendations are being made regarding IBD and pregnancy, but any person with IBD who is pregnant should follow the ‘stringent social distancing’ recommendation, along government guidelines.

**We have also identified some frequently asked questions to our advice line and hope that the below will cover your query.** We understand that this is a particularly anxious time for patients and their families.

***Do I need to stop my medication?***

**Do not stop your medication**; we see the risks associated with flares to be greater than the risk of contracting serious complications of COVID-19. If you have been diagnosed with COVID-19 please continue to self-isolate, contact us for specific recommendations regarding your IBD and its treatment.

***Is my medication an immunosuppressant?***

- Mesalazines/ 5-ASA do not suppress the immune system

- Steroids do suppress the immune system

- Azathioprine/mercaptopurine/methotrexate do suppress the immune system

- Advanced therapies (such as adalimumab, golimumab, infliximab, tofacitinib, ustekinumab) do suppress the immune system

- Vedolizumab (also a biologic) works by suppressing the gut immune system, so this should avoid systemic immunosuppression, although is still placed in the ‘moderate risk group’ needing stringent social distancing

***Am I at an increased risk of catching COVID-19?***

If your immune system is suppressed you are **not** at an increased risk of catching COVID-19. The key to avoiding COVID-19 is **prevention**:

1. Handwashing,
2. Avoid touching your face
3. Social distancing: aim for 2 metres of space around you (3 paces)
4. Avoid meeting people
5. Travel only if essential , where possible, avoid using public transport

***Am I at an increased risk of severe COVID-19?***

If you are unfortunate enough to get COVID-19 and you take immunosuppressive therapy, then it is still not clear whether there is an increased risk of severe disease, although we know that most infections with COVID-19 are mild. It may help to know that there is some evidence that suppressing the immune system reduces the chance of a damaging immune response to the virus. This is quite the opposite of what might be suspected – but the truth is that nobody yet knows. Some patients with IBD and COVID-19 have been identified around the world (15 at the last count, 22 March 2020), Almost all these patients had been on immunomodulator therapy, but have experienced no serious outcomes so far. Clearly, the situation and information is subject to change, but it helps to have this global experience. The decision about a person’s treatment should they get COVID-19 has to be made on an individual basis: that will involve discussion between infectious diseases’ and IBD specialists.

***Do I need to social distance/ self-isolate?***

We should all be practising social distancing. The government has advised that people in vulnerable groups (immunosuppressed) should be considering self-isolation. National guidance separates people with IBD into three groups described above (highest, moderate and lowest risk categories).Common sense applies (see above), but we should all be practising social distancing.

Self-isolationis recommended for people who have symptoms of COVID-19 including a high temperature and new onset of a cough. You are recommended to self-isolate at home for 7 days from the onset of your symptoms, and for 14 days if someone in your household has developed the symptoms due to the incubation period.

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection

***My job involves the general public or meeting others, do I need to change my duties? (Patients on immunosuppression).***

If you can change your work so that it can be managed from home then we would recommend this at this time. Some places of work are able to make amendments to less forward-facing roles and this would be a good compromise.

***Do I need to avoid large gatherings/meetings?***

Definitely; NHS and government advice is updated daily.

***Should I restrict travel?***

Please follow the government guidance on traveling. If traveling on Public Transport ensure precautions are appropriately taken (good hand hygiene and avoid touching your face with unwashed hands).

***Should I attend my appointments?***

**Infusions** – St Mary’s day unit is currently screening patients prior to their infusions for risk of COVID-19 in order to ensure general safety. If you have any symptoms suggestive of COVID 19, do **not** attend and contact the IBD team. Local, national and international advice at this stage is to continue medication and infusions.

**Clinic –**Routine face-to-face appointments are being cancelled; patients are being contacted with regards to telephone based appointments instead. Those individuals who are unwell and need to be seen will be discussed on a case-by- case basis with the relevant health professionals and patient involved.

**Endoscopy appointments**: routine endoscopy appointments are being cancelled, but patients are being contacted individually, so please stay flexible and we will do our best

This letter is being copied to your GP. We will be working closely with your general practitioner to ensure you get the medicines and care you need at this difficult time.

If you need any further information, please check the websites of CCUK, BSG and L&D. In the event of being concerned about your health condition deteriorating or being unwell please follow your normal contact procedures with specialty and primary care teams.

**Take care of yourself but also be kind and considerate to others in these difficult times.**

**Dr. Matt W. Johnson**

**Useful Links**

BSG COVID 19 UK IBD Tool for Patients

<https://www.bsg.org.uk/covid-19-advice/covid-19-uk-ibd-tool-for-patients-is-now-live/>

Crohn’s and Colitis UK – routine advice with regards to immunosuppression therapies and risks associated with these - https://www.crohnsandcolitis.org.uk/news/updated-wuhan-novel-coronavirus-advice

NHS England – precautions to take - https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/

Government and other approved guidance –

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-social-distancing-and-for-vulnerable-people/guidance-on-social-distancing-for-everyone-in-the-uk-and-protecting-older-people-and-vulnerable-adults

https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection

https://www.bsg.org.uk/covid-19-advice/bsg-advice-for-management-of-inflammatory-bowel-diseases-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/