

Chronic Disease and COVID-19: What You Need to Know

Tips and information to protect yourself and your family

What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is a new kind of illness caused by a virus. People can carry and spread the virus without feeling sick. It causes fever, coughing, and trouble breathing.

What should people with chronic diseases know about COVID-19?

Anyone can get sick from COVID-19, but people who are older than 65 and people of any age who have a serious chronic disease are the most likely to become very ill or die.

People who have one or more of these chronic conditions should be extra careful to protect their health from COVID-19:

- Asthma and lung disease
- Heart disease
- Unmanaged diabetes
- Severe obesity (BMI>40)
- Weakened immune systems because of diseases like HIV or because people are going through cancer treatment.

What can people with chronic diseases and their families do to protect themselves from COVID-19?

Making healthier choices every day can help people prevent and improve their chronic disease as well as their well-being, overall. Some of the most important healthy choices include quitting tobacco use, getting more physical activity, and eating nutritious meals and snacks.

People with chronic diseases must be sure to:

- Take regular medications on time and as directed (reach out to your healthcare provider to ask about obtaining an extra supply of medications in case you cannot get to the pharmacy or clinic).
- Make time to keep measuring your blood pressure if you have hypertension or take your blood sugar if you have diabetes.
- Use the telemedicine/telehealth option for a regular medical visit (your healthcare provider can tell you if your insurance company offers this option).

Everyone should follow CDC's recommendations to prevent COVID-19:

- Avoid crowded places and stay at home.
- When you are outside your home, stay at least two arms' length away from other people.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds (or the time it takes to sing "Happy Birthday" twice). If you don't have soap and water, you can use hand sanitizers that contain at least 60% alcohol.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Cover your cough or sneeze with the inside of your elbow.
- Clean objects or surfaces in your home that people touch a lot, such as door knobs, elevator buttons, and key pads.

If you or a family member starts to get a fever, cough, or shortness of breath, it may be because of COVID-19. Here is what you should do next:

- Take steps to protect your family members from getting sick (read the CDC fact sheet on how to keep your family safe: www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/get-your-household-ready-for-COVID-19.html).
- Call your healthcare provider and follow their advice on what to do next. Do not go to the Emergency Room unless your provider tells you to do so.
- If you have a job or go to school, let them know that you are sick. You should not go to work or school.

Managing Your Chronic Disease to Prevent COVID-19

► I have... diabetes

When people with diabetes do not manage their blood sugar levels well, they can have more trouble fighting off illnesses like COVID-19. Because of this, people with poorly controlled diabetes are more likely to become very ill or die if they get COVID-19.

What you can do:

- Make sure to monitor your blood sugar regularly and to take your medications as directed. Contact your provider to help you get an emergency supply of medications.
- Follow your healthcare provider's advice about healthy eating and increasing physical activity.
- Stop smoking, as smoking can make it more likely that you have heart attack or stroke.

► I have... heart disease

COVID-19 can strain all of the systems in the body, which puts additional stress on your heart. In patients with heart disease, COVID-19 can make it more likely that your heart won't be able to keep up with the needs of your body.

What you can do:

- Ask your doctor about telehealth visits to manage your condition so that you don't have to go into the clinic, where you could catch COVID-19.
- Maintain the medications and treatment plan that you and your doctor created.
- Keep up the healthy habits that your doctor recommends, including healthy eating, exercise, getting enough sleep, and managing stress.
- Stay up-to-date on other vaccinations that can protect you from diseases that stress your heart, including pneumonia and the flu.

► I have... asthma

Both asthma and COVID-19 can harm your lungs. If you have asthma and get ill with COVID-19, it could lead to life-threatening lung conditions.

What you can do:

- If you have one, follow your Asthma Action Plan (www.cdc.gov/asthma/actionplan.html).
- Take your medications as directed. Talk to your doctor and pharmacist to be sure you have an emergency supply of prescription medications.
- Stop smoking and using e-cigarettes, which can cause lung damage.

Quitting tobacco use now can help you improve your health. People with chronic diseases who use tobacco are most likely to have life-threatening health issues. If you use tobacco, make the commitment today to quit. Call the free quitline today to get started at 1-800-QUIT-NOW (1-800-784-8669).

► I have... cancer

Some types of cancer and cancer treatments can weaken people's immune systems and can make them more likely to get very ill from COVID-19.

What you can do:

- Before going into your appointments for cancer treatment, ask your doctor how you can help protect yourself from catching COVID-19.
- Check if any oral medications that you are taking can be sent directly to you so that you don't have to go to the pharmacy or the clinic.
- Your doctor may recommend other things that you should do to isolate yourself from others to help make sure that your treatments have the best chance of working.

“Whether you make the decision to quit smoking, choose fruit instead of your regular snack, or take some light exercise during TV commercial breaks, it's never too late to try something new to improve your well-being.”

For more information, please visit:

- **NACDD webpage for COVID-19 resources:** www.chronicdisease.org/news/496967/NACDD-Resources-to-Support-States-Response-to-COVID-19.htm
- **CDC website for COVID-19 resources:** www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html

— John W. Robitscher, MPH, CEO,
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