

# COVID-19 and Genital Cancer: Guidance for Women

(Updated on 20 November 2020)

*The following Guidance is part of the AFOG's advocacy effort to inform our women of the knowledge currently available on this topic. It is not meant to be a clinical diagnostic service and you are advised to consult your own Healthcare Professional for any specific issues. This Guidance is not definitive as the situation may vary from one country or setting to another. As this pandemic evolves, we will keep this information updated at regular intervals. The information contained here relates to the AFOG Statements that can be accessed in the COVID-19 Corner for further information.*

## 1. What is COVID-19?

COVID-19 is the infectious disease caused by the coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, which mainly affects the lungs.

As of 20 November 2020, more than 55.6 million people worldwide have tested positive for the COVID-19 infection and 1.34 million people have unfortunately died.

COVID-19 affects different people in different ways. Most infected people will only develop mild to moderate illness and recover without hospitalisation.

## 2. What are the symptoms and signs of COVID-19?

Some people have no symptoms at all. Most will have mild symptoms as listed below:

Most common symptoms:

- Fever
- Dry cough
- Tiredness/ fatigue.

Other symptoms that are less common and may affect some patients include:

- Loss of taste or smell
- Nasal stuffiness/blockage
- Conjunctivitis (also known as "red eyes")
- Sore throat
- Headache
- Muscle or joint pain
- Different types of skin rash
- Nausea or vomiting
- Diarrhoea
- Chills or dizziness.

Symptoms of severe COVID-19 disease include:

- Shortness of breath

- Loss of appetite
- Confusion
- Persistent pain or pressure in the chest
- High fever (above 38°C / 100.4°F).

### **3. As a cancer patient, am I more likely to get COVID-19?**

Because SARS-CoV-2 is a new virus, anyone who is exposed to it is at risk of becoming infected and developing COVID-19. Cancer patients are a vulnerable group as the cancer may weaken your immune system and make you more susceptible to infections. Your immune system can be further compromised by some cancer treatments such as surgery, chemotherapy or radiotherapy.

### **4. Will a COVID-19 infection be worse if I'm a cancer patient?**

As mentioned above, cancer and the treatments for cancer can weaken your immune system. Consequently, if you do contract a COVID-19 infection, the risk of complications will be greater. Other risk factors for serious complications include being elderly, being overweight and having underlying disease conditions like diabetes or high blood pressure.

### **5. Will COVID-19 make my cancer worse?**

There is no evidence that COVID-19 has a direct effect on your cancer. However, as a result of the pandemic, hospital resources may be re-deployed and services will be reduced to minimise the risk of you contracting COVID-19 in hospital. This of course may mean that there will be some delay in your treatment.

### **6. Is it safe to go to the hospital or should I delay my treatment?**

Many women are concerned that going to the hospital/clinic will expose them to a greater risk of getting COVID-19. However; health facilities now have measures in place to reduce this risk such as wearing masks, ensuring safe distancing and reducing the frequency of follow-ups as well shortening waiting and consultation times. In addition, many centers are now making available consultation by phone or on-line.

As for delaying your treatment, your healthcare team will carefully weigh the risks of starting or continuing treatment against the benefits. Treatment will be prioritised and individualised depending on the severity of your condition. Rest assured that you and your family will be included in this discussion and be part of the decision-making process.

Some cancer treatments can be safely delayed, whereas others cannot. Some routine follow-up visits may be safely delayed or conducted through telemedicine. If you take oral cancer drugs, you may be able to have prescribed treatments sent directly to you, so you don't have to go to a pharmacy. A hospital or other medical facility may ask you to go to a specific clinic, away from those treating people sick with coronavirus.

The coronavirus situation is changing daily, with countries, states and cities making changes in how they are handling quarantine and critical health care, so check with your provider as needed.

### **7. If I have COVID-19, can I continue my cancer treatment?**

In general, because of the risk of severe complications, you will likely be treated first for the COVID-19 infection before continuing with your cancer treatment. However, your healthcare team will usually take a multi-disciplinary approach to the problem and will decide on the best course of action in consultation with you and your family.

### **8. Will routine cancer screening still be available to everyone?**

Screening tests look for cancer in people who don't have symptoms. In a lockdown situation, these services will usually be delayed to a more suitable time when the movement restrictions are eased and more resources are made available. If you have signs or symptoms that might be from cancer, for instance, a lump in the breast or swelling in your tummy, you should discuss this with your provider right away, as you will need exams or tests that evaluate those particular signs and symptoms.

### **9. How can I find support?**

Coping with a diagnosis of cancer is difficult and more so during the pandemic when you are self-isolating and there is limited access to your healthcare provider. It is a frightening and worrying time for women undergoing treatment and for those newly diagnosed.

Social support is very important and you may want to consider reaching out by phone or on-line to:

- a support group that enables virtual meetings
- other cancer patients on a social media platform
- a close family member or friend on a regular basis

If your feelings of anxiety or depression persist or get worse, you may want to connect with a professional counsellor offering an on-line service.

## **10. How can I protect myself from COVID-19 if I have cancer?**

This is important as you belong to a vulnerable group.

You can help protect yourself from COVID-19 by:

- Staying home
- Hand hygiene: Washing your hands frequently with an alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water.
- Social distancing: Maintaining at least a 1-meter distance between yourself and others and avoiding crowded spaces.
- Wearing a mask and avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth.
- Practicing respiratory hygiene: Covering your mouth and nose with your bent elbow or tissue when you cough or sneeze; then dispose of the used tissue immediately.
- Maintaining a healthy diet and taking your supplements including Vitamin D.

As the situation is evolving, please adhere to local or national guidelines.

## **11. Is there a vaccine yet?**

Not yet, although many potential vaccines for COVID-19 are being studied. A few vaccines under study have shown very promising results but it will be several months before it is available for routine use.

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