

What people living
with HIV need to
know about
HIV and COVID-19

COVID-19 is a serious disease and, just like the general population, all people living with HIV should take all recommended preventive measures to minimize exposure to, and prevent infection by, the virus that causes COVID-19.

Data are emerging on the clinical outcomes of COVID-19 among people living with HIV. People living with HIV appear to be at an increased risk of more severe outcomes from COVID-19 compared with other people. People living with HIV should be vaccinated against COVID-19, regardless of their CD4 or viral load, because the potential benefits outweigh the potential risks. HIV should be included in the category of high-risk medical conditions when developing vaccine priority. Importantly, when administering vaccines to people living with HIV, confidentiality about their underlying condition should be preserved.

UNAIDS will continue to study how HIV and COVID-19 together affect people living with HIV as data from countries and communities responding to both epidemics continue to emerge. UNAIDS will also continue to study the safety and efficacy of COVID-19 vaccines as more vaccines become authorized for use and more people living with HIV are enrolled in clinical studies. The lessons learned from rolling out innovations or adapting service delivery to minimize the impact on people living with HIV will be shared and replicated as they become available.

People living with HIV should continue to take their medicines. In the event of difficulties in accessing their treatment, they should discuss with their pharmacist or health-care provider options for alternative access or delivery options. They should continue to be cautious and pay attention to the prevention measures and recommendations. It is also important that people living with HIV have multimonth refills of their HIV medicines.

If a person living with HIV develops COVID-19 and if hospitalization is not necessary, they should manage their COVID-19 symptoms at home, with supportive care for symptomatic relief. They should maintain close communication with their health-care provider and report if symptoms progress (e.g. sustained fever for more than two days, new shortness of breath). The patient and caregivers should be aware of warning signs and symptoms that warrant in-person evaluation, such as new dyspnoea (difficult or laboured breathing), chest pain/tightness, confusion or other mental status changes. It is important for people living with HIV to continue their antiretroviral therapy and other medications as prescribed.



Precautions that people living with HIV and key populations should follow to prevent COVID-19 infection

Stay safe

- Clean hands frequently with soap and water (for 40–60 seconds) or an alcohol-based hand sanitizer (for 20–30 seconds).
- Cover your mouth and nose with a flexed elbow or tissue when coughing or sneezing. Throw the tissue away after use.

- Avoid close contact with anyone who has a fever or cough.
- Stay home when you are ill.
- If you are experiencing fever, a cough or difficulty breathing and have recently travelled to, or are a resident in, an area where COVID-19 is reported, you should seek medical care immediately from your community health service, doctor or local hospital. Before you go to a doctor's office or hospital, call ahead and tell them about your symptoms and recent travel.
- If you are ill, wear a medical mask and stay away from others.



Stay informed

- Know the facts about COVID-19 and always check a reliable source, such as the World Health Organization: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>.

Be prepared

- You should have a supply of your necessary medical supplies on hand—ideally for 30 days or more. The World Health Organization HIV treatment guidelines now recommend multimonth dispensing of three months or more of HIV medicines for most people at routine visits, although this has not been widely implemented in all countries.
- Know how to contact your clinic by telephone in the event that you need advice.
- Know how to access treatment and other support within your community. This treatment could include antiretroviral therapy, tuberculosis medication (if on tuberculosis treatment) and any other medication for other illnesses that you may have.



- Key populations, including people who use drugs, sex workers, gay men and other men who have sex with men, transgender people and prisoners, should ensure that they have essential means to prevent HIV infection, such as sterile needles and syringes and/or opioid substitution therapy, condoms and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). Adequate supplies of other medications, such as contraception and gender-affirming hormone therapy, should also be obtained.
- Not all countries have implemented policies to allow for longer prescriptions. Be in touch with your health-care provider as early as possible. Consider working with others in your community to persuade health-care providers and decision-makers to provide multimonth prescriptions for your essential medicines.
- Discuss with your network of family and friends how to support each other in the event that social distancing measures are put in place. Make alternate arrangements within your community for food, medicines, care for children or pets, etc.
- Help others in your community and ensure that they also have an adequate supply of essential medicines.
- Check that you know how to reach your local network of people living with HIV by electronic means. Make a plan for telephone and for social media connections in the event that public health measures call for people to stay home or if you become ill.





Support yourself and people around you

- The outbreak of COVID-19 may cause fear and anxiety—everyone is encouraged to take care of themselves and to connect with loved ones. People living with HIV and their communities have decades of experience of resilience, surviving and thriving, and can draw on their rich shared history to support their families and communities in this current crisis. Pay particular attention to your mental health by:
 - ▶ **Avoiding excessive exposure to media coverage of COVID-19. Only read information from trusted sources.**
 - ▶ **Taking care of your body. Take deep breaths, stretch or meditate. Try to eat healthy, well-balanced meals, exercise regularly, get plenty of sleep and, where possible, avoid alcohol and drugs.**
 - ▶ **Making time to unwind and remind yourself that negative feelings will fade. Take breaks from watching, reading or listening to news stories—it can be upsetting to hear about the crisis repeatedly. Try to do some other activities you enjoy in order to return to your normal life.**
- Connecting with others. Share your concerns and how you are feeling with a friend or family member.



Stop stigma and know your rights

- Stigma and discrimination is a barrier to an effective response to COVID-19. This is a time where racism, stigma and discrimination can be directed against groups considered to be affected.



- Your workplace, access to health care or access to education, for you or your children, may be affected by the COVID-19 outbreak if social distancing measures are put in place in your community. Find out your rights and make sure that you and your community are prepared.

Treatment of COVID-19

- Treatment of COVID-19 is an active area of research and several randomized clinical trials are ongoing to determine whether antiretroviral medicines used for treating HIV might be useful for treating COVID-19. Many other possible treatments have been or are also being tested in well-designed clinical trials. At this time, no antiretroviral agents have been shown to be effective in these studies. It is important that people living with HIV should not switch their antiretroviral therapy regimens or add antiretroviral medicines to their regimens for the purpose of preventing or treating COVID-19.

