

Public Health Link

From the Chief Medical Officer for Wales

Distribution:	As Appendix 3
From:	Dr Frank Atherton, Chief Medical Officer
Date:	24 March 2020
Reference:	CEM/CMO/2020/09
Category:	Immediate (cascade within 6 hours)
Title:	Coronavirus (COVID-19) – Letter to GPs – Shielding patients at highest risk
What is this about:	This alert covers the management and shielding of patients who are at the highest risk of severe morbidity and mortality from coronavirus (COVID-19).
Why has it been sent:	This alert highlights a Welsh Government communication being sent to patients at the highest risk of mortality and severe morbidity from COVID-19 and seeks help from GPs to identify any further patients at highest risk.

Management and shielding of patients who are at the highest risk of severe morbidity and mortality from coronavirus (COVID-19)

I am writing to ask for your help with the management and shielding of patients who are at the highest risk of severe morbidity and mortality from coronavirus (COVID-19).

On Monday 16 March the Welsh Government in conjunction with the UK Government announced a package of measures, advising those who are at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19 to be particularly stringent in following social distancing measures.

<https://gov.wales/coronavirus-social-distancing-guidance>

This group has been identified to the public as those who are:

- aged 70 or older (regardless of medical conditions)
- under 70 with an underlying health condition listed below (ie anyone instructed to get a flu jab as an adult each year on medical grounds):
- chronic (long-term) respiratory diseases, such as asthma, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), emphysema or bronchitis
- chronic heart disease, such as heart failure
- chronic kidney disease
- chronic liver disease, such as hepatitis
- chronic neurological conditions, such as Parkinson's disease, motor neurone disease, multiple sclerosis (MS), a learning disability or cerebral palsy

- diabetes
- problems with the spleen – for example, sickle cell disease or if you have had your spleen removed
- a weakened immune system as the result of conditions such as HIV and AIDS, or medicines such as steroid tablets or chemotherapy
- being seriously overweight (a BMI of 40 or above)
- those who are pregnant

This wider group, who broadly speaking comprise the criteria of adults eligible for an annual flu vaccine, will not be proactively contacted but have instead been asked to take steps to reduce their social interactions in order to reduce the transmission of coronavirus.

There is a subset of this group who have clinical conditions which are likely to put people at the highest risk of mortality and severe morbidity from COVID-19. We have identified this group, based on expert consensus. Given the difficulties of identifying those most vulnerable, in some cases this is going to require clinical judgements by you about your patients. You may know of specific additional patients in your practice who you think are particularly high risk. On the other hand there are a limited number of people that we can shield effectively or for whom this highly socially isolating measure would be proportionate on health grounds; many patients who fulfil the criteria may after discussion with you prefer not to be placed under such strict isolation for what will be a prolonged period.

Further broad information about the methodology we followed to identify this group at the highest risk of mortality and severe morbidity from COVID-19 is contained in **Appendix 1**. A copy of the letter the Welsh Government is issuing to this group is at **Appendix 2**.

I recognise the significant pressures that GP practices are under, which the necessity to self-isolate staff where they have symptoms compatible with coronavirus has inevitably made more acute. I also know the changing pace of guidance and requests that we make of you in support of your patients, as a result of the need to address this new global pandemic, are significant. I massively appreciate all the efforts GPs and other primary care staff are making, and will make, to care for patients and communities at this difficult time, and know the public does as well.

Please accept my sincere thanks for your expertise, help, patience and support at this challenging time.

Kind regards,

Personal Data

DR FRANK ATHERTON
Chief Medical Officer

Appendix 1 – Identification of Vulnerable Groups: Methodology

This appendix explains the basis of the latest advice that has been sent to all patients who are considered to be at highest risk of mortality and severe morbidity from coronavirus (COVID-19). Emerging clinical data about COVID-19 indicated that the death rate would be high for groups of people with particular chronic diseases. The modelling suggests that if we were able to effectively shield these people it would have a significant positive effect on the fatality rate in that group and overall (but a modest effect on the overall curve). This group has therefore been recommended to undertake shielding measures for their own protection.

In order to be effective these people will have to undergo strict social isolation with no contact from the outside world beyond that absolutely necessary, for a period of at least 12 weeks. This will significantly impact quality of life, increase social isolation, and will not be without its own attendant physical and mental health risks. Aligned to the process in NHS England, we drew up a list of conditions which we felt would justify affected individuals taking such extreme measures. This group are a subset of a wider more generally vulnerable group (broadly any adult eligible for an annual flu vaccine), who have already been advised to follow social distancing measures to reduce their number of contacts for a period of at least 12 weeks.

We developed an approach towards ensuring coverage across affected groups by identifying the most at risk group of patients and all of these patients will be contacted centrally by NHS Wales. We took the following steps when drawing up the list of patients who have been identified centrally by extracting relevant groups from national datasets:-

We have used the work the NHS England Clinical Reference Groups (groups of experts who advise the NHS on Direct Commissioning) undertook to consider which conditions would put patients at intermediate, high or very high risk of severe morbidity or mortality from COVID-19.

And then based on our current understanding and specialist and wider advice senior clinicians from across NHS Wales categorised these conditions into the following high risk groups (see below):

1. Solid organ transplant recipients

2. People with specific cancers

- People with cancer who are undergoing active chemotherapy or radical radiotherapy for lung cancer
- People with cancers of the blood or bone marrow such as leukaemia, lymphoma or myeloma who are at any stage of treatment
- People having immunotherapy or other continuing antibody treatments for cancer
- People having other targeted cancer treatments which can affect the immune system, such as protein kinase inhibitors or PARP inhibitors.

- People who have had bone marrow or stem cell transplants in the last 6 months, or who are still taking immunosuppression drugs.
- 3. **People with severe respiratory conditions including all cystic fibrosis, severe asthma and severe COPD**
- 4. **People with severe single organ disease (e.g. Liver, Cardio, Renal, Neurological)**
- 5. **People with rare diseases and inborn errors of metabolism that significantly increase the risk of infections (such as SCID, homozygous sickle cell disease)**
- 6. **People on immunosuppression therapies sufficient to significantly increase risk of infection**
- 7. **People who are pregnant and children up to the age of 18 with significant heart disease, congenital or acquired**

We will issue you with a full list of the patients in your practice who we have contacted that are in this high risk patients with complex / severe multi-morbidity group in the coming days.

We accept that given this is a new and rapidly moving disease there are inevitable limitations in our methodology but have designed the most robust approach that was possible at pace with the aim of identifying the maximum number of vulnerable individuals in sufficient time to effectively shield this group.

Appendix 2

IMPORTANT ADVICE TO KEEP YOU SAFE FROM CORONAVIRUS

You are receiving this letter because you have an existing health issue – or you care for someone who does. This means it is very important you take extra steps to avoid catching coronavirus (also known as COVID-19).

For most people coronavirus will be a mild illness. Some people with existing health issues can get seriously ill if they get the virus.

We want to do everything we can to keep you safe. But we need your help.

It is important you stay safe and keep getting the treatment and care you need. We also need you to follow some important advice.

This letter tells you how to look after yourself and about the help you can get.

The best way to avoid getting coronavirus is to stay at home for the next 12 weeks. You should not have any visitors apart from your carers and healthcare workers.

You, or the person you care for, should:

- Avoid any contact with anyone who has a high temperature (above 37.8 °C) or a new and continuous cough. These are symptoms of coronavirus.
- Stay at home for the next 12 weeks.
- Stay away from people, even friends and family. Do not go out at all.
- Arrange for food and medicine to be delivered to your home. It should be left at the door so you don't come in to contact with anyone.
- Keep in touch with people using the phone, the internet and social media.
- Use the phone or internet to contact your GP or the other services you need.
- Wash your hands regularly with soap and warm water for at least 20 seconds. Make sure carers and healthcare workers do the same when they visit.

If you live with someone, or care for someone with an existing health issue, you should:

- Try to keep away from them as much as you can. Try not to be in the same room. If you have to be in the same room try and keep a window open.
- Keep three steps away from other people. Do not sleep in the same bed if you can avoid it.
- Do not share towels. Use different bathrooms if you can. If you share a bathroom, clean it after every use.
- Avoid using the kitchen at the same time as others and eat your meals in separate rooms. Clean all cups, plates and cutlery thoroughly.

Ask friends, family or neighbours to bring you food and medicine. Please ask them to follow the advice in this letter.

If you do not have people who can help, you should call your local council. You can find the number at the end of this letter.

You will continue to get the healthcare you need during this period. Your GP practice and hospital care team know you are at a higher risk. They will be in touch if any changes are needed to your care.

If you or the person you care for develops symptoms of coronavirus – a high temperature (above 37.8 °C) or a new and continuous cough – you should use the online coronavirus service (<https://gov.wales/check-if-you-need-coronavirus-medical-help>) or, if you do not have access to the internet, call 111.

Please see the following detailed, advice:

1. Carers and support workers who come to your home

Carers or support workers who support you with your everyday needs can continue to visit you, unless they have symptoms of coronavirus.

All carers or support workers must wash their hands with soap and warm water for 20 seconds when they enter your home and often while they are in your home.

It is a good idea to speak to your carers now and make a plan about what would happen if one of them becomes unwell.

If you don't have friends or family who can help, contact your local council. Contact details for each local council are included at the end of this letter.

2. Your medicines

If you do not have your prescriptions collected or delivered, you will need to arrange this.

1. Ask someone who can pick up your prescription from your local pharmacy to help (this is the best option).
2. If you do not have anyone who can help, telephone your pharmacy and ask them to deliver your prescription. Let them know you are in a high-risk group and are being asked to stay at home for 12 weeks.

You may also need to arrange any specialist medication prescribed to you by your hospital care team to be collected or delivered to you.

3. Planned GP appointments

Wherever possible, GP appointments will be provided by phone, email or online. If you need to be seen, your GP practice will contact you to let you know what you should do.

4. Planned hospital appointments

Your hospital or clinic will contact you if any changes need to be made to your care or treatment. Please phone your hospital or clinic if you have any questions about your appointment.

Some hospital appointments may need to be cancelled or postponed. This is part of the plans to help the NHS to respond to the coronavirus outbreak. You will still be able to contact your hospital care team if you have an urgent issue.

5. Support with daily living

Please discuss any needs you have with your carers, family, friends, neighbours or local community groups to see how they can support you.

If you do not have anyone who can help you, please contact your local council. The contact details for each local council are at the end of this letter.

If you are employed, please show this letter to your employer. You cannot go to your normal place of work – you will need to work at home for the next 12 weeks. You do not need to get a fit note from your GP.

If you need help from the welfare system visit: <https://www.gov.uk/universal-credit>.

6. Urgent medical attention

If you have an urgent medical question relating to your existing medical condition, or about the person you are caring for, contact your GP practice, or your specialist hospital care team. Where possible, you will be supported by phone, or online. If your doctor decides you need to be seen, the NHS will contact you to arrange how to do this.

7. What if I get coronavirus?

If you, or the person you care for, develop symptoms of coronavirus - a high temperature (above 37.8 °C) or a new and continuous cough - you should use the online coronavirus service (<https://gov.wales/check-if-you-need-coronavirus-medical-help>) or, if you do not have access to the internet, call 111.

If you get coronavirus and you need to go to hospital you will need to take a bag with the things you need for an overnight stay. Take an emergency contact number and any medication you are on.

If you have an advanced care plan, please include it.

8. Looking after your well-being

We understand that you might be worried. Staying at home for a long time and not seeing people can be boring and lonely.

There are some things you can do to help you feel happier and less anxious. Ideas include:

- Look for ideas for exercises to do at home on the NHS website;
- Spend time doing things you enjoy – reading, cooking and other indoor hobbies;
- Try to eat healthy, well-balanced meals (<https://gov.wales/eatwell-guide>), drink enough water, exercise regularly, and try to avoid smoking, alcohol and recreational drugs;
- Try spending time with the windows open to let in fresh air. Sit where you can see out of the window. Get some natural sunlight, get out into the garden or sit on your doorstep if you can;
- Stay in touch with people via phone, email or social media if you can.

There are also services available to support you. Talking about worries and problems can make things easier. The C.A.L.L. Helpline is a dedicated mental health helpline for Wales, which provides confidential listening and emotional support and will help you contact support available in your local area, including voluntary and charitable organisations. It can be contacted on 0800

I&S or by texting 'help' to **I&S**. The C.A.L.L. website is at:
<http://callhelpline.org.uk/>

Further information about coronavirus, including the latest guidance is available on the Welsh Government and Public Health Wales websites:

<https://gov.wales/coronavirus>

<https://phw.nhs.wales/topics/latest-information-on-novel-coronavirus-covid-19/>

We will continue to do all we can to keep you safe.

Yours sincerely,

DR FRANK ATHERTON

List of health issues, which put people at a very high risk:

1. Solid organ transplant recipients
2. People with specific cancers:
 - People with cancer who are undergoing active chemotherapy or radical radiotherapy for lung cancer
 - People with cancers of the blood or bone marrow such as leukaemia, lymphoma or myeloma who are at any stage of treatment
 - People having immunotherapy or other continuing antibody treatments for cancer
 - People having other targeted cancer treatments, which can affect the immune system, such as protein kinase inhibitors or PARP inhibitors.
 - People who have had bone marrow or stem cell transplants in the last six months, or who are still taking immunosuppression drugs.
3. People with severe respiratory conditions including all cystic fibrosis, severe asthma and severe Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD)
4. People with severe single organ disease (e.g. Liver, Cardio, Renal, Neurological)
5. People with rare diseases and inborn errors of metabolism that significantly increase the risk of infections (such as Severe Combined Immunodeficiency (SCID), homozygous sickle cell)
6. People on immunosuppression therapies sufficient to significantly increase risk of infection
7. People who are pregnant and children up to the age of 18 with significant heart disease, congenital or otherwise

Local authority contacts

Please only contact your Local authority if:

- You do not have family members who can help; or
- You do not have a local support network of friends (or others) which can help; or
- You do not have support from a carer or community organisation, which can help.

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

Address: Municipal Offices, Civic Centre, Ebbw Vale, Gwent, NP23 6XB

Tel No:

Website: www.blaenau-gwent.gov.uk

Bridgend County Borough Council

Address: Bridgend County Borough Council, Civic Offices, Angel Street, Bridgend, CF31 4WB

Tel No:

Website: www.bridgend.gov.uk

Caerphilly County Borough Council

Address: Tredomen Park, Ystrad Mynach, Hengoed, CF82 7PG

Tel No:

Website: www.caerphilly.gov.uk

Carmarthenshire County Council

Address: County Hall, Carmarthen, Carmarthenshire, SA31 1JP

Tel No:

Website: www.carmarthenshire.gov.uk

Ceredigion County Council

Address: Neuadd Cyngor Ceredigion, Penmorfa, Aberaeron, Ceredigion, SA46 0PA

Tel No:

Website: www.ceredigion.gov.uk

City & County of Swansea

Address: Civic Centre, Oystermouth Road, Swansea, SA1 3SN

Tel No:

Website: www.swansea.gov.uk

City of Cardiff Council

Address: County Hall, Atlantic Wharf, Cardiff, CF10 4UW

Tel No:

Website: www.cardiff.gov.uk

Conwy County Borough Council

Address: PO BOX 1 , Conwy, LL30 9GN

Tel No:

Website: www.conwy.gov.uk

Denbighshire County Council

Address: PO Box 62, Ruthin, LL15 9AZ

Tel No:

Website: www.denbighshire.gov.uk

Out of Hours Tel No:

Flintshire County Council

Address: County Hall, Mold, Flintshire, CH7 6NB

Tel No:

Website: www.flintshire.gov.uk

Gwynedd Council

Address: Shirehall St, Caernarfon LL55 1SH

Tel No:

Website: www.gwynedd.gov.uk

Isle of Anglesey Council

Address: Council Offices, Llangefni, Anglesey, LL77 7TW

Tel No:

Website: www.anglesey.gov.uk

Merthyr Tydfil Council

Address: Civic Centre, Castle Street, Merthyr Tydfil, CF47 8AN

Tel No:

Website: www.merthyr.gov.uk

Monmouthshire Council

Address: County Hall, The Rhadyr, Usk, NP15 1GA

Tel No:

Website: www.monmouthshire.gov.uk

Neath Port Talbot Council

Address: Civic Centre, Port Talbot SA13 1PJ

Tel No:

Website: www.npt.gov.uk

Newport City Council

Address: Civic Centre, Godfrey Road, Newport, NP20 4UR

Tel No:

Website: www.newport.gov.uk

Pembrokeshire County Council

Address: County Hall, Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire, SA61 1TP

Tel No:

Website: www.pembrokeshire.gov.uk

Powys County Council

Address: Powys County Hall, Spa Road East, Llandrindod Wells, Powys, LD1 5LG

Tel No:

Website: www.powys.gov.uk

Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council

Address: The Pavilions, Cambrian Park, Clydach Vale, Tonypany, Mid Glamorgan, CF40 2XX

Tel No:

Website: www.rhondda-cynon-taf.gov.uk

Torfaen County Borough Council

Address: Civic Centre, Pontypool, NP4 6YB

Tel No:

Website: www.torfaen.gov.uk

Vale of Glamorgan Council

Address: Civic Offices, Holton Road, Barry CF63 4RU

Tel No:

Website: www.valeofglamorgan.gov.uk

Wrexham County Borough Council

Address: The Guildhall, Wrexham, LL11 1AY

Tel No:

Website: www.wrexham.gov.uk

To: NHS Wales Shared Services Partnership to forward to:

All General Practitioners - please ensure this message is seen by all practice nurses and non-principals working in your practice and retain a copy in your 'locum information pack'.

Cc: Health Boards and NHS Trusts:

Chief Executives
Medical Directors
Nurse Directors
Directors of Public Health

Cc: Public Health Wales:

Chief Executive
Director of Public Health Services
Consultants in Communicable Disease Control
Microbiologists
Consultant Epidemiologists
Vaccine Preventable Disease Programme

Cc: NHS Direct Wales
British Medical Association
Royal College of GPs
Royal College of Physicians
Academy of Medical Royal Colleges
Royal College of Nursing
Royal College of Midwives
Royal Pharmaceutical Society
Community Pharmacy Wales
Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health Wales