



American College of Gastroenterology

COVID-19 Pandemic:

How Will This Affect Your Care and What to Ask Your Gastrointestinal (GI) Doctor

What is it?

COVID-19 is caused by infection from a virus known as coronavirus. There have been several coronaviruses in the past that have been associated with epidemics. The current coronavirus is called SARS-CoV-2

Symptoms

- Common symptoms are fever, cough, sore throat, fatigue (feeling tired)
- Gastrointestinal symptoms, such as nausea and diarrhea, have been reported in up to 50% of patients. Altered taste and sense of smell have also been widely reported
- Symptoms may appear 1-14 days after exposure
- Abnormal liver tests can be seen in 20-30% of infected patients
- The majority of people who are infected (approx. 80%) have mild or no symptoms

How it spreads

- Respiratory spread is the most common way of spreading the disease. However, the virus may also be spread by contact with infected stool
- Unfortunately, a person with no symptoms can pass on coronavirus to other people

Who is at higher risk and what can be done?

- Older people who have chronic medical conditions (such as heart disease, lung disease, diabetes, decompensated cirrhosis [liver disease with complications], HIV with low CD4 counts, and immunosuppression, [including liver and other solid organ transplant recipients or inflammatory bowel disease]) or other issues that might decrease the body's immune system response, are at risk for serious complications from infection
- Avoid bringing patients (or their escorts) who are over age 65 into a medical facility
- Patients on immunosuppressive drugs for Inflammatory Bowel Disease (IBD) and autoimmune hepatitis should continue taking their medications in general, although consulting with your physician is prudent. The risk of disease worsening by stopping the immunosuppressive medication generally outweighs the chance of contracting coronavirus. These patients also should follow CDC guidelines for at-risk groups by avoiding crowds and limiting travel. If you are concerned about your work environment, please contact your doctor
- Widespread coronavirus infection has affected the production of some medications. Contact your pharmacy immediately to find out if your medication supply might be affected. If there is reason to believe this could occur, notify your doctor immediately

What you can do to prevent spread of disease

- Please wash your hands, don't touch your face, and practice "social distancing" (deliberately increasing physical space between people to avoid spreading illness).
- Ask your doctor if your scheduled endoscopic procedure can be safely postponed to a later date
- Non-urgent GI procedures should be postponed. This could mean average risk colon cancer screening or standard polyp surveillance colonoscopies. Every situation is different, and you need to talk to your GI doctor to see if your procedure can be delayed
- Ask your doctor for alternatives for in-person office visits, such as telemedicine or phone consultations, or if your visit can be safely postponed to a later date
- If you have a potential exposure or fever or new respiratory symptoms, please call your doctor before coming into the hospital or clinic

For more information

- The COVID-19 situation is constantly changing, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) website is a good place for reliable information <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>
- Information about COVID-19 from the American College of Gastroenterology can be found at www.gi.org/COVID19

Authors

Michael H. Bass, MD, FACP for the ACG Patient Care Committee, GI Specialists of Delaware

Christine Y. Hachem, MD, FACP for the ACG Patient Care Committee, St. Louis University

David A. Greenwald, MD, FACP for the American College of Gastroenterology, Mt. Sinai School of Medicine

Updated March 23, 2020