



**May 2020**

## **Covid19 outbreak – Recommendations on self-care for people living with heart disease and high blood pressure**

### **Background**

The severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) or COVID-19 virus is thought to spread **mainly** from person-to-person.

- Between people who are in close contact with one another (within about 1-2 metres).
- Through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs. People are thought to be most contagious when they are most symptomatic (the sickest). It may be possible that a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose or eyes. Current evidence suggests that novel coronavirus may remain viable for hours to days on surfaces made from a variety of materials. On the other hand, transmission of the novel coronavirus to persons from surfaces contaminated with the virus has not been clearly demonstrated

It is highly likely that older people and those with pre-existing and severe medical conditions such as heart disease are at higher risk of serious illness if they become infected with COVID-19. It is very important that you try and prevent getting infected with the coronavirus by staying at home, hand washing etc.

### **General recommendations**

- **Stay up to date** by checking the coronavirus pages of the Ministry for Health: [www.covid19health.gov.mt](http://www.covid19health.gov.mt) or the Department of Information website on [www.covid19malta.info](http://www.covid19malta.info).
- **Wash your hands** often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds especially after you have been in a public place, after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing, before preparing and/or eating food, before and after going to the bathroom and on returning home from outside.

- If soap and water are not readily available, **use a hand sanitizer that contains 70% alcohol**. Cover all surfaces of your hands and rub them together until they air dry.
- **Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze or use the inside of your elbow**. Throw used tissues in the lidded trash bin. Immediately wash your hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds.
- **Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth** with unwashed hands.
- **Regularly clean frequently touched objects and surfaces** with regular household detergent and water. This includes tables, doorknobs, light switches, countertops, handles, desks, phones, keyboards, toilets, faucets, and sinks. Allow enough contact time as indicated by the detergent's manufacturer.
- **Avoid contact with anyone who is ill**.
- Take everyday precautions to keep space between yourself and others. Practice physical distancing by keeping 2m away from others. Refrain from frequenting public places. Avoid direct physical social contact practices such as hugs and handshakes.
- If you are ill, stay at home, even if your symptoms are mild. **DO NOT GO** to work until 24hrs after symptoms have subsided.

### Specific recommendations

- **Stay at home DOES NOT apply to heart attacks. DO NOT DELAY.** Every minute counts. If you experience:
  - worsening chest pains during exercise or chest pain at rest
  - palpitations
  - shortness of breath
  - fainting**Call 112** Emergency immediately so that they assess your symptoms.
- **Medications:** Medications are one of the best ways available to lower your risk of further heart damage including the risk of another heart attack. Make sure that you continue to take your medications as prescribed by your specialist or doctor. Continue using aspirin if it is part of your routine care, unless advised by your specialist or doctor. You should not stop using any treatment unless this is advised by your specialist or doctor. If you become ill from the coronavirus, and you are admitted to hospital, your specialist may change your medications.

If any new evidence emerges that links some particular medicines to worse outcome from Covid-19, the health authorities will issue guidance in the media.

Make sure that you have enough medication for 2 to 4 weeks. Contact your pharmacy or POYC if you need home delivery of your medications as you should be isolating at home. Keep a supply of over-

the-counter medications such as paracetamol, a thermometer as well as alcohol hand rub and a small supply of face masks in case that you become unwell.

- **Protect yourself:** Avoid leaving home during this time when coronavirus is circulating within the community. It is likely that people who have underlying heart conditions are more likely to show symptoms of the infection or have a more severe infection than others. It is very important that you try and prevent getting infected by staying at home, hand washing etc.
- **Activate your social networks:** Contact family, friends, neighbours, local pharmacist, local grocer etc. so that you can make plans to receive any food or medication supply that you need while you are isolating at home or you become ill.
- **Keep updated and educate yourself from trusted sources.** Remember that not everything you hear from social media is factual. Follow the HPDPMalta social media pages for evidence based up to date information.
- **Have enough groceries and household items for 2 to 4 weeks.**
- **Eat well.** Eating well is very important to reduce your risk of further damage to your heart and blood pressure. Eat healthy foods in the right amounts at the right times, especially if you have high cholesterol levels or diabetes. The best diet is the Mediterranean diet which consists mainly of plant foods which are naturally high in dietary fibre, mostly vegetables and fruit, whole grains (oats, wholemeal bread, pasta, rice and other wholegrains), legumes (beans, peas, lentils, chickpeas), nuts, seeds, herbs, spices but also fish and smaller amounts of lower fat dairy, poultry and meat. By eating a variety of fresh and unprocessed foods every day, you will get the vitamins, minerals, dietary fibre, proteins and antioxidants that the body needs. Consult the resources provided by your doctor, nurse or dietician or during your cardiac rehabilitation programme. Make every effort not to gain weight during this period of isolation at home. Resources on healthy eating and maintaining a healthy weight are available on the HPDP website [www.healthpromotion.gov.mt](http://www.healthpromotion.gov.mt) or by email on [health.pro@gov.mt](mailto:health.pro@gov.mt) or by private message on @HDPDMalta social media pages.
- **Keep hydrated.** It is important to drink around 1.5L to 2L of plain water every day, unless your doctor has advised you otherwise.
- **Keep active.** Being physically active is very important for people living with heart disease. Physical activity helps to maintain your physical fitness and lowers the risk of further heart damage. It also helps to maintain a healthy weight and to improve your mood. Your exercise depends on your capability - the aim is to fit in at least 30 minutes of activity every day. Follow exercise classes online or on television, or else plan your own routine. Include activities which make your heart beat faster and your breathing deeper, as well as stretching exercises.

- **Blood pressure self-monitoring:** If you suffer from high blood pressure, continue to monitor regularly if you have a blood pressure monitor at home. Monitor once a week or according to your doctor's advice. Avoid drinking alcohol or coffee, smoking or exercising for half an hour before measuring your blood pressure. Rest in a chair for at least 5 minutes without talking before taking the reading. Take at least two readings in the morning before taking your medications and in the evening before dinner. Keep a record of the results to help you when consulting your doctor or nurse.
- **Tobacco use:** Giving up tobacco is one of the best things you can do for your health. Covid-19 is mainly a disease of the lungs, and so quitting or reducing tobacco use can help to reduce the risk from the coronavirus. Quitting can be hard but getting the right support will make it easier. Call the tobacco quitline on **8007 3333** to get help from trained professionals by telephone.
- **Reduce anxiety:** At this time of uncertainty, it can be easy to become anxious and allow your mental health to suffer. In order to protect your mental health:
  - Limit the news and be careful what you read; have a specific time when you read or listen to the news. In order to reduce listening to misinformation, use only trusted sites.
  - Have breaks from social media and mute groups or sites which may act as triggers for anxiety or panic attacks.
  - Follow regular schedules for waking up, dressing, eating, exercising, working, entertainment and going to sleep.
  - Establish objectives for each day as well for the whole week.
  - Limit caffeine intake.
  - Stay connected with those people you care about.
  - Sit outside in your balcony, yard, roof or near a window to enjoy daylight and sunshine.
  - Exercise regularly according to your capability.

Psychological support is available 24 hours a day for those who need it on the **1770** helpline.

- **Manage your diabetes:** If you are living with diabetes, it is very important to follow your doctor's advice with regards to diet, physical activity and medications. Check your blood glucose levels according to the schedule recommended by your doctor or nurse. Your target blood glucose level is usually 4 to 6 mmol/L before meals and below 7.8 mmol/L two hours after meals. Keep a record of the levels to help you when consulting your doctor or nurse.
- **Hospital or health centre appointments:** If you have any scheduled appointment with your medical team, they will contact you by telephone before the appointment and advise you on whether you should attend or whether the appointment will be postponed.

- **What to do if you feel unwell:** If at any time you feel very unwell, phone **112** for emergency care. If you experience any symptoms which may be linked to the coronavirus phone the public health helpline on 111

References:

1. Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), US. Coronavirus Diseases 2019 (COVID-19): How to Prepare. Available from: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prepare/prevention.html>.
2. World Health Organisation: Mental Health and Psychosocial Considerations during the Covid-19 outbreak. <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/mental-health-considerations.pdf>
3. European Centre for Disease Control <https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/news-events/information-covid-19-specific-groups-elderly-patients-chronic-diseases-people>
4. European Society for Cardiology [https://www.escardio.org/Education/COVID-19-and-Cardiology?utm\\_medium=Email&utm\\_source=ESC&utm\\_campaign=ESC+-+Newsletter+-+week+17](https://www.escardio.org/Education/COVID-19-and-Cardiology?utm_medium=Email&utm_source=ESC&utm_campaign=ESC+-+Newsletter+-+week+17)
5. American Heart Association <https://www.heart.org/en/health-topics/heart-attack/life-after-a-heart-attack/lifestyle-changes-for-heart-attack-prevention>