CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) AND SPINAL CORD INJURY

The Ohio State Brain and Spine Center has received myriad questions about the coronavirus, or COVID-19, and whether those with spinal cord injury (SCI) could be especially at risk due to many being immunocompromised (spinal cord injury-induced immune deficiency syndrome). While there's still a great deal that is unknown about this specific virus and how it affects different people, the limited data available from COVID-19-infected patients and from other types of coronaviruses (e.g., SARS-CoV and MERS-CoV) show that it's possible that older adults and those with underlying chronic conditions may be at risk for more severe symptoms and outcomes.

There are no specific precautions for those with SCI beyond those suggested for everyone (reviewed below). However, these precautions may look different for someone with SCI and may include things that others don't often consider, such as needing to disinfect assistive devices in addition to washing your hands, ways that others may need to assist those with limited mobility and hand dexterity, avoiding holding things in your mouth, etc. It is important to try your best to follow the suggested precautions, as you are at a greater risk of developing more serious symptoms and possible complications (including death) if you do get COVID-19. Another concern is that if someone with SCI develops COVID-19 during a time that our medical system is overwhelmed, there may be limitations to the medical interventions available.

Recommended Precautions

- There is currently no vaccine available to prevent COVID-19; the best way to prevent illness is to avoid being exposed to this virus. However, the CDC also recommends everyday preventive actions to help avoid spreading of respiratory diseases, including:
  - Limiting social contacts when possible
  - If you use caregivers, see below for additional considerations
  - If you're working, consider asking your employer about remote work options

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- Avoid close contact with people who have symptoms (recommendations are to stay 6 feet away)
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth (or other mucus membranes; using clean methods when cathing or doing bowel program)
- Stay home when you're sick
- Cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue, then throw the tissue in the trash; for those with limited upper extremity strength, also consider coughing/sneezing into your elbow or shoulder, as able, or if you're sick this may be an appropriate time to use a face mask
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces using a regular household cleaning spray or disinfecting wipe—this includes any assistive devices (don't forget things like pushrims, wheels, arm rests, mouth sticks, urinals, phones/smart devices, wheelchair or lift controls, etc.)
- Follow the Centers for Disease Control's recommendations for using (or not using) a facemask
    - The CDC does recommend that people who are well (without viral symptoms) wear a face mask in public settings to protect themselves from respiratory diseases, including COVID-19
    - Face masks should be used by people who show symptoms of COVID-19 to help prevent the spread of the disease to others
    - Face masks are also crucial for health care workers and people who are taking care of someone in close settings (at home or in a health care facility)
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. Especially wash before and after going to the bathroom (for those who self-catheterize, washing before is an important step), before eating, and after blowing your nose, coughing or sneezing. For those with limited hand dexterity, you might be able to ask someone to help you with this process as they also wash/disinfect their hands.
    - If soap and water aren't available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol. Always wash hands with soap and water if hands are visibly dirty.

What if I have personal care attendants (PCAs) or my caregiver gets sick?

If possible, we recommend planning ahead by taking these steps (source: Center for Disability Rights):

- Ensure that you have backup caregivers in case your regular caregiver cannot work due to illness or other barriers
- If a caregiver does not show up as expected, ensure that you have the ability to get assistance
- Have at least a week of nonperishable food in your home at any given time, and identify people who can assist with shopping or delivery (also consider pickup and/or delivery options)
- Stock up on other important supplies (e.g., toilet paper, cleaning supplies, hygiene products, etc.)
- Identify a way to get medications in a timely manner such as having friends or family assist you or using a pharmacy that offers prescription drug delivery
- Plan ahead for the needs of any pets or service animals by stocking pet food or arranging a backup caregiver
- Have any caregivers immediately wash their hands and use hand sanitizer when they arrive, prior to touching surfaces or frequently used items, when providing personal care, or when feeding you
- Regularly clean, sanitize and disinfect the surfaces that are touched in your home to prevent the spread of infection (this will include assistive devices)
- Have your caregiver wear a surgical mask if someone close to him/her becomes sick
- Encourage caregivers to seek medical care if they are sick and utilize backup attendants

Additional Resources

What you need to know about coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19):
cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/2019-ncov-factsheet.pdf

What to do if you are sick with coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19):
cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/sick-with-2019-nCoV-fact-sheet.pdf

Video made by Wheels2Walking about those with SCI and the coronavirus:
youtube.com/watch?v=UBhb6GnXJM8

Blog from the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation, "The Coronavirus and spinal cord injury":
christopherreeve.org/blog/daily-dose/the-coronavirus-and-spinal-cord-injury

We recommend three primary sources for ongoing updates:
- CDC
- National Institutes of Health
- World Health Organization

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