

COVID-19 AND EPILEPSY

Epilepsy New Zealand has been receiving regular information from the Ministry of Health and other agencies, often more than once a day, showing just how quickly the situation is evolving.



No doubt there will be many people, including those with epilepsy, who have questions around their risk and what to do in these uncertain times.

Hopefully the information below may help reassure you and where necessary, prompt you to contact your trusted health professional.

Will having epilepsy put me more at risk of getting infected with the coronavirus?

No. There is no evidence to say that epilepsy makes you more likely to catch this virus. This is similar to catching the flu. You are not any more likely to get the flu because of your epilepsy. This is because epilepsy does not compromise your immune system. The Ministry of Health (MoH) has advised that those at higher risk of being infected with this virus are older people, and those with underlying or long term conditions such as diabetes, heart conditions, or asthma.

What if I get infected with the coronavirus?

If you have been infected with the virus, it does not automatically mean you will show severe symptoms. Most people will have very mild or no symptoms at all and will recover fairly quickly. It is important that you continue to take your regular medication exactly as prescribed every day, even if you feel unwell. If you are worried about symptoms, **call Healthline on 0800 358 5453. Do not go directly** to your GP or hospital.

Will this trigger more seizures?

If you show symptoms such as a high fever, cough, or difficulty breathing you might be at risk of increased seizures. Feeling unwell generally and running a temperature can be a trigger for seizures. Coughing may keep you up at night, and we know that a lack of sleep can be a trigger for seizures too. If you experience severe symptoms and this is affecting your seizure control, seek advice **over the phone from Healthline on 0800 358 5453.**

How can I protect myself from the coronavirus?

There are some simple but very effective measures you can put in place to minimise your risk of catching the virus:

- **Wash your hands regularly** – This is necessary particularly after coughing and sneezing, before you prepare food or eat, after toilet use, after handling waste, when caring for someone who is sick, and when your hands are visibly dirty. Using soap and hot water following good handwashing hygiene will kill off any virus. When you are out and about, hand sanitisers containing at least 60% alcohol can be effective to keep your hands clean.
- **Maintain social distancing** - Keep at least one metre distance between yourself and anyone who is coughing or sneezing. This is to avoid breathing in any droplets which may contain the virus. Avoid close contact with people who are unwell and avoid using their personal items such as their mobile phone. Do not share eating or drinking utensils.
- **Practice good hygiene** - This means cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Use your elbow if you do not have a tissue. Bin used tissues immediately. Wash your hands frequently as mentioned above.
- **Never touch your eyes, nose and mouth with unwashed hands** - Also, clean or disinfect objects and surfaces you often touch, such as your mobile phone, keyboard, door handles or desk.

Will the coronavirus lead to medication shortages?

Pharmac has provided the following statement on 17 March 2020 following a request from Epilepsy New Zealand:

“With the outbreak of COVID-19, it's inevitable that there will be disruptions to supply chains – quarantines may slow or halt activities in manufacturing plants or they may impact transportation and ports. This is a global issue.

PHARMAC has contacted all contracted medicine and device suppliers to seek information about any potential impacts to supply and their contingency plans. The majority have responded to confirm that they have contingency plans in place and are actively managing their supply chains as best they can. Some suppliers have advised us that they anticipate future disruptions due to supply, whether due to manufacturing or transportation. We are working closely with them to determine the best approach to manage potential shortages.

Most medicine suppliers under PHARMAC contracts are required to keep a minimum stock in New Zealand equal to two months demand. There is typically another four-six weeks' worth of stock in New Zealand across the

wholesale and retail supply chain, and many medicines are dispensed three-months all-at-once, so patients have a good volume of supply at home. Some PHARMAC medicines contracts (for example some oral antibiotics) have a greater minimum stock holding requirement, for example four months.”

Should you wish further information direct from Pharmac, this can be found on their website <https://www.pharmac.govt.nz/information-for/coronavirus-covid19/>

What if I can't go out to get my prescription?

You may want to think about how you would get your medication now. This is in case you need to self-isolate or are too ill. You could get a family member or friend to pick up your prescription and medication and drop this on your doorstep. If you do not have someone to pick up your medication, you could ask a local pharmacy if they may be able to do a pickup and delivery service for you. If you have difficulty getting your medication, contact **Healthline on 0800 358 5453**.

What if I have been granted access to lamotrigine and need to fill my prescription during this time?

Following enquiries from Epilepsy New Zealand, Pharmac has worked to remove possible restrictions around filling your prescription and on 26 March 2020 they confirmed that the system is now set up to allow dispensing of lamotrigine EC medication from pharmacies other than that nominated on the application. Information regarding this can be found on their [website](#) with further updates coming. Pharmac have advised that they will be communicating this to the sector along with other changes that are being made.

Who can support me in other ways during this time?

Epilepsy New Zealand has Educators in most areas of New Zealand. Prior to the arrival of Covid-19, Educators were available to meet with you either in person, over the phone or via a video call or various other ways. In light of recent developments the decision has been made that face-to-face interactions with Educators has been suspended until further notice. This does not mean the support is unavailable, it will just be done in other ways. There is no charge for this service and we welcome the chance to support you through this and any other concerns you may have regarding your epilepsy. Changes have been made to the phone system so that when you phone the Epilepsy New Zealand 0800 number, you will be put through to an Educator directly. This Educator may not be the one located in your area however they will take your details and ask the Educator in your area to make contact with you at their earliest convenience. This is to ensure minimal calls are missed and will enable to Epilepsy New Zealand to meet the needs of those needing support

more quickly. Feel free to contact **Epilepsy New Zealand on 0800 37 45 37 or go to our website www.epilepsy.org.nz**

More information

There is more general information about the coronavirus, how it affects travellers and measures the government have put in place available here. <https://covid19.govt.nz>

- *All information correct and up to date as at Thursday 26 March 2020*
- *Adapted from information available from Epilepsy Scotland, Pharmac and MoH.*