

# **A Resource for Independent Rheumatology Clinics: COVID-19**

*Updated March 17, 2020*



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## **Introduction**

The American Rheumatology Network (ARN) continues to monitor federal, state and local health advisories regarding the coronavirus (COVID-19) and will update this resource accordingly. Please note this document contains general information which may not be applicable to all patients, facilities, communities and circumstances. This resource guide is intended to provide you with suggestions on how to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. This guide is not exhaustive, and we encourage you to supplement your knowledge by visiting the CDC website and other public health websites. Each practice must apply this information based on their independent judgment and keep abreast of daily developments. There may be state and local regulations that apply. Many states are actively adopting emergency regulations to manage the pandemic. We encourage you to check with your state regulators.

## **Environmental Prevention Strategies**

### Front Desk, Lobby, & Common Areas

- Hand-hygiene supplies, including alcohol-based sanitizer, should be readily accessible in patient care areas.
- Limit front desk, lobby, and common areas to scheduled appointments to reduce social interactions.
- Allow only patients and other essential guests in the office. Patients requiring medical or emotional support during a visit will be allowed one (1) person to accompany them during the provider encounter.
- Allow patients to check-in and wait for their appointments in their car. Receptionists should call or text the patients when the physician is ready to see them.
- Reduce the number of chairs in the waiting room to increase distance to 6-feet between each chair.
- Remove magazines and books from waiting areas.
- Discontinue beverage service (e.g. coffee, tea, water) to reduce surface contact contamination.
- Clean and disinfect shared equipment and items such as clipboards and pens before and after use.
- Wipe down high-touch surfaces such as elevator buttons, door handles, countertops, and chairs with Cavi1 wipes and other cleaning agents that specify use against coronavirus.

### Clinic

- Eliminate handshaking and minimize physical contact to the extent necessary for diagnosis and treatment.
- Hand-hygiene supplies, including alcohol-based sanitizer, should be readily accessible in patient care areas.
- Remove magazines and books from exam rooms.
- Clean and disinfect shared equipment and items such as clipboards and pens before and after use.

- Clean and disinfect personal equipment, such as stethoscopes before and after each use.
- Clean and disinfect exam tables, counter surfaces, doorknobs (in and out of room), and the arms of chairs patients and /or their caregivers are seated in.
- Clean and disinfect computer keyboards after each use.

#### Infusion Suites

- Increase the distance to 6 feet between each infusion chair.
- Eliminate handshaking and minimize physical contact to the extent necessary for diagnosis and treatment.
- Clean and disinfect shared equipment and items such as clipboards and pens before and after use.
- Wipe down high-touch surfaces such as elevator buttons, door handles, countertops, and chairs.
- Remove magazines and books from the waiting area or infusion suite.
- Discontinue beverage service (e.g. coffee, tea, water) to reduce surface contact contamination.
- Clean and disinfect infusion chairs, counter surfaces, doorknobs (in and out of infusion suite), and the arms of chairs their caregivers are seated in.
- Clean and disinfect computer keyboards after each use.

## Other Considerations

- Reduce staff and patient movement throughout the office. Be mindful of the number of interactions as well as physical barriers (i.e. doors)- is it possible to go a quicker route, or avoid these “dense” areas altogether?

## **Informing Staff**

### Email Notification(s)

Ensure administrative and clinical staff are informed of the signs and symptoms of COVID-19, the implementation of additional procedures, and guidance for specific events or scenarios. See a template staff email “Guidance for Prevention & Risk Assessment of COVID-19” ([Appendix A](#)) and “COVID-19 Update” ([Appendix B](#)) as of March 16, 2020.

### Staff Scripts to Screen Patients

- Receptionists and Clinical Team Members
  - “Before I complete the check-in process, I have a few questions related to the coronavirus outbreak that we are asking all our patients. Have you traveled out of state or abroad in the last 14 days? Do you have a fever, cough or feel short of breath? Do you believe you have come into contact with someone who has symptoms or signs of the flu or has been diagnosed with coronavirus?”

## **Patient Communications**

### Appointment Reminder Services & Practice Voicemail

Appointment reminder services often have the capability to broadcast messages to a wide audience. Consider sending a modified version of the following message to patients with appointments scheduled today through the expected date of your local school district closings. Note: This may increase the number of calls to your Front Desk, so it is important to let your staff know the time this will be sent out.

*We are continuing to closely monitor federal, state, and local health advisories regarding the outbreak of the coronavirus, COVID-19. Our practice continues to follow the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommendations to safeguard the health and well-being of our team members and patients. If you are experiencing shortness of breath, a cough, fever, flu-like symptoms, or have traveled outside of the country in the past 14 days you should remain home and reschedule your appointment. After completing the check-in process with our receptionist, patients are welcome to wait in their cars. We ask that you leave any nonessential guests not receiving care at home. Please visit our website for regular updates.*

### Patient Portal Messages

Patients that may unsubscribe from the appointment reminder service may be enrolled in your practice's patient portal. See [Appendix C](#) for a sample message that can be modified for your practice.

### Social Media & Websites

Tech-savvy patients often turn to social media and websites to gather information. It's important to update your website and social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) to reflect the policies or procedures your practice is implementing. This is a great place to provide relevant, credible resources for patients. See [Appendix D](#) for a sample social media and website notice.

### **Resources**

These resources concern our patient population as well as the general population. Patient resources may be posted to social media and websites, and additionally linked in Patient Portal Messages or other forms of patient communication utilized by your practice.

1. General Recommendations for High-Risk Complications  
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/specific-groups/high-risk-complications.html>
2. CDC's Interim Guidance for Public Health Personnel: Evaluating & Testing Persons for Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)  
<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/php/guidance-evaluating-pui.html>
3. American College of Rheumatology Announcement: A Message from the ACR about Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)  
<https://www.rheumatology.org/announcements>
4. American Medical Association: COVID-19 Resource Center for Physicians  
<https://www.ama-assn.org/delivering-care/public-health/covid-19-2019-novel-coronavirus-resource-center-physicians>
5. Arthritis Foundation: Coronavirus and Arthritis: What You Need to Know  
<https://arthritis.org/about-us/news-and-updates/coronavirus-and-arthritis-what-you-need-to-know>
6. See [Appendix E](#) for clinic flyers.

## Appendix

### Appendix A

*Template Staff Email: Guidance for Prevention & Risk Assessment of COVID-19*

To: All Staff

Subject: Guidance for Prevention & Risk Assessment of COVID-19

Staff,

We are continuing to monitor federal, state, and local health advisories regarding the COVID-19 coronavirus. We take the health and safety of our team members and patients very seriously and would like to remind everyone of best practices to prevent exposure to respiratory illnesses in the workplace. While at work, we encourage everyone to continue to exercise increased precautions to safeguard their health. Below is some helpful information and we will continue to provide updates as necessary.

- Please stay at home if you are ill. Team members who have symptoms or do not feel well should stay home until they are free from all symptoms for at least 24 hours. Recognize the symptoms of respiratory illness: shortness of breath, coughing, body aches and fever.
- If you begin feeling sick at work, please alert your supervisor immediately.
  - Continue to use good sick etiquette by covering your cough or sneeze with a tissue, washing your hands thoroughly for at least 30 seconds (It is important to wet your hands prior to putting soap on to ensure a good lather), and avoid touching public, high-touch surfaces like elevator buttons.
- Perform routine cleaning of your workspace as wipes and sprays are readily available for your use.

Our practice is following the CDC recommendations for COVID-19. You can find the additional here: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>

There is no vaccine for COVID-19. The best way to prevent illness is to avoid being exposed to this virus. The virus is thought to spread from person-to-person, between people who are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet) and through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes.

Symptoms\* of COVID-19 include:

- Fever
- Cough
- Shortness of breath

*\*This list is not exhaustive, and symptoms may appear 2-14 days after exposure.*

Some people are at higher risk of getting very sick from COVID-19. This includes:

- Older adults (Those over the age of 65)
- People with chronic medical conditions like:
  - Heart disease
  - Diabetes
  - Lung disease, or
  - Compromised Immune Systems

In preparation for the potential presentation of patients or employees with COVID-19, we are:

- **Stock up on supplies** like masks and hand sanitizers that will be distributed throughout the clinic. Additionally, the infusion department should order plenty of IV fluids and tubing in the event supply chains are disrupted.
- **Follow everyday precautions** as we would normally observe during flu season. The precautions include:
  - Cleaning your hands often with soap and water for 30 seconds, especially after blowing your nose or sneezing. It is important to wet your hands prior to putting soap on to ensure a good lather.
  - Using a hand sanitizer that is at least 60% alcohol when soap and water are not available.
  - Avoiding touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands, avoid touching high-touch surfaces like handrails and elevator buttons.
  - Avoid close contact with anyone who is sick, keeping at least 6 feet between you and others.
- **Encourage patients and employees to stay home** if they're sick or exposed to someone else who is sick.
- **Perform routine cleaning** of all frequently touched surfaces, such as workstations, countertops, and doorknobs. No additional disinfection beyond routine cleaning is recommended by the CDC at this time. We will also provide disposable wipes and sprays so that commonly used surfaces can be wiped down by employees before each use.

Moving forward, we will attempt to identify patients with signs and symptoms of respiratory infection (e.g., fever, cough) **before they enter our clinics and infusion suites.**

- We will utilize our appointment reminder system to instruct patients to reschedule their appointment should they have fever or respiratory symptoms.



- We have prominently displayed at our front door, a flyer communicating the symptoms of COVID-19 will be displayed. Patients should inform staff of fever or respiratory symptoms immediately upon arrival.
- At the registration desk, patients will see a flyer reminding them of the symptoms of COVID-19 and hand sanitizer will be available. Masks are available as well.
- Before check-in begins, the receptionist will ask if the patient is feeling feverish and/or has respiratory symptoms not typical for them. If they do, they should not be registered and instead encouraged to go home and call their PCP. If they feel feverish would like their temperature checked, we will ask them to use a face mask and escort them to an appropriate setting. Patients with any symptoms should put on a facemask at check-in and keep it on until they leave the facility.
  - In [Location 1], patients are escorted to Exam Room 4.
  - In [Location 2], patients are escorted the administrative office.
  - In [Location 3], the patient is escorted through the external lobby, not through the waiting room, to the end exam room on the research hallway. Infusion will escort the patient to the Exam Room 1.
  - The patient should take their own temperature allowing the employee to stay at least 6 feet away.
  - If the patient's temperature is above 100.4, they should be sent home. Instruct them to call their PCP. The supervisor in the office should be notified promptly.

Please reach out if you have additional questions. We will keep you informed as more information becomes available.

Sincerely,

[Name]

[Position]

## Appendix B

*Template Staff Email: COVID-19 Update (as of 3/16/20)*

To: All Staff

Subject: COVID-19 Update

Staff,

We are continuing to monitor federal, state, and local health advisories regarding the viral respiratory illness COVID-19. As this is a rapidly evolving situation, information and guidance will be updated as needed to reflect the most recent recommendations from the CDC, OSHA and other agencies to safeguard the health and wellbeing of our fellow team members and patients.

During this time, please remember to:

- Use infection prevention measures and social distancing when possible.
- Stay home if you are ill and continue to practice diligent hand hygiene and remembering to cover your cough or sneeze with a tissue.
- Practice routine and avoidance of high-touch surfaces like elevator buttons.
- Be aware of the COVID-19 symptoms: shortness of breath, coughing, body aches and fever and alert your supervisor if you begin to feel ill.
- Be mindful of comments and remarks about coronavirus in the presence of our patients.
- Limit your movement through adjacent departments.
  - We have increased our sanitation procedures and are disinfecting more frequently during the day, making sure to disinfect between each patient and paying close attention to surfaces routinely in contact with our patients. Whenever possible, team members should wash their hands for at least 30 seconds (It is important to wet your hands prior to putting soap on to ensure a good lather.) or use hand sanitizer in front of patients. Hand sanitizer is readily available and face masks should be distributed to those in need. Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands and keep a 6-foot distance between you and others if possible.

Scripted communication has been sent to our patients regarding our efforts to protect them and our team members during this rapidly evolving situation via social media, our patient portal, appointment reminders, and on our main phoneline recording. If a team member or patient is concerned, they have contracted or been exposed to COVID-19, please do not go to a doctors' office, urgent care or emergency room. Instead, call one of our local resources for COVID-19:

- Insert Local Hospital(s) Virtual Care Information
- Insert Local Health Department Information

Patients are encouraged to reschedule their appointment if they have travelled in the last 14 days to a country or state with known community transmission (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/after-travel-precautions.html>) and/or have any symptoms of respiratory illness or fever (100.4 or greater). We will screen all patients, guests entering our clinics, and we request that our patients not bring nonessential guests to their visit. Additionally, we have canceled all drug rep visits until further notice.

Receptionists and clinical team members should use the following scripting when addressing patients:

*“Before I complete the check-in process, I have a few questions related to the coronavirus outbreak that we are asking all our patients. Have you travelled out of state or abroad in the last 14 days? Do you have a fever, cough, or feel short of breath? Do you believe you have come into contact with someone who has symptoms or signs of the flu or has been diagnosed with coronavirus?”*

Here is our updated phone message:

*“Thank you for calling Low Country Rheumatology. We are continuing to closely monitor federal, state, and local health advisories regarding the outbreak of the coronavirus, COVID-19. Our practice continues to follow the CDC recommendations to safeguard the health and wellbeing of our team members and patients. Any patient or member of our care team who feels ill and exhibits the symptoms of respiratory illness -- shortness of breath, cough, fever, or flu-like symptoms – should remain home and contact their physician. After completing the check-in process with our receptionist, patients are welcome to wait in their cars. Additionally, we ask that you leave any nonessential guests not receiving care at home and alert us to any travel outside the country. Please visit our website for more information, a receptionist will be with you shortly.”*

If patients are not sick or have not had exposure, they are encouraged to attend their regularly scheduled visits and infusions, and continue to follow CDC recommendations like limiting travel, enact social distancing measures and infection prevention. Please note the difference between the *immunosuppressed* patient (for example a cancer patient who receives chemotherapy) and our infusion patients who are *immunomodulated*. Immunosuppression is the active medical suppression of the immune response, while immunomodulation is an adjustment in the level of an immune response. We anticipate our patients will not be as vulnerable as the immunosuppressed patient, however we encourage them to continue infection prevention practices and social distancing as recommended by the CDC. Please remind patients to let us know if before their next visit should they experience a change in health related to COVID-19.

We do not plan to test for the coronavirus in our clinics. After greeting a patient at the front desk or in triage, should they report COVID-19 symptoms, they should be directed to return home and consult with their PCP before returning to our clinic. If they request a temperature check, escort the patient to:

- In [Location 1], patients are escorted to Exam Room 4.
- In [Location 2], patients are escorted the administrative office.
- In [Location 3], the patient is escorted through the external lobby, not through the waiting room, to the end exam room on the research hallway. Infusion will escort the patient to the Exam Room 1.
- The patient should take their own temperature allowing the employee to stay at least 6 feet away.
- If the patient's temperature is above 100.4, they should be sent home. Instruct them to call their PCP. The supervisor in the office should be notified promptly.
- Moving forward, we will check and record a patient's temperature as a required vital until further notice.

We will use the same exposure risk screening used for patients to screen our team members. We are limiting nonessential business travel and encourage all employees to limit their personal travel. Please communicate any personal travel plans to your immediate supervisor and HR.

In our practice, we are considering telehealth visits and actively understanding the potential impact on our operations and the mechanics of this process in Nextgen. We may also consider adding infusion make-up days should the need arise. There will be more information in the coming days; in the meantime, should you have any concerns, please reach out to your supervisor or HR.

Sincerely,

[Name]

[Position]

## Appendix C

### *Sample Patient Portal Message*

Dear Patients,

Your health and safety are a top priority. With the growing number of confirmed cases of coronavirus (COVID-19), we want to share what we are doing to protect the health of our patients, staff members, and community.

[Name of Practice] is operating with normal business hours until further notice. We are taking the following preventive measures:

- We have increased our facility hygiene procedures (examples: sanitizing waiting room chairs, infusion chairs, exam rooms, door handles, etc.).
- We have reduced the number of chairs in the waiting room.
- We have increased the distance between chairs in the waiting room and infusion suite.
- Additionally, we have requested staff who do not feel well to remain at home and seek medical care.

In addition to our efforts, we ask that you review the information below to help prevent the spread of any unwanted germs:

- Stay home if you are feeling sick.
- Stay home if you experience a fever, cough, shortness of breath.
- Stay home if you recently traveled to an area affected by COVID-19 or have been in close contact with someone who has a virus.
- Leave guests at home, if possible.
- After checking in with the Front Desk, you may wait in your car and the receptionist will call or text you when the physician is ready to see you.
- Cover your coughs or sneezes with your sleeve, not your hands.
- Wash your hands often and please use hand sanitizer.

We encourage patients to keep their scheduled appointments and maintain treatment schedule, unless instructed otherwise by your physician. We will continue to update you as more information is available.

Regards,

[Name]

[Position]

## Appendix D

### *Social Media Notice*

We are OPEN. Please take the following into consideration:

1. Stay home if you are experiencing a fever, cough, or shortness of breath.
2. Stay home if you have traveled to a known high-risk country (see link below)
3. Leave guests at home, if possible.
4. After checking in with the Front Desk, you can wait in your car and we'll call or text you when the physician is ready to see you.

We are taking the following measures:

1. We have increased our facility hygiene procedures (examples: sanitizing waiting room chairs, exam rooms, door handles, etc.)
2. We've reduced number of chairs in the waiting room
3. Increased distance between chairs in both our waiting room and infusion

We encourage patients to keep their scheduled appointments and maintain treatment schedule, unless instructed otherwise by your physician. We will continue to update you regularly.

<https://www.cdc.gov/.../travele.../after-travel-precautions.html>

# We are OPEN

We are taking special precautions to prevent the spread of coronavirus, as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

We will continue to monitor federal, state and local health advisories.

## COVID-19 Virus Update

### We are OPEN

Please take the following into consideration:

1. Stay home if you are experiencing a fever, cough, or shortness of breath.
2. Stay home if you have traveled to a known high-risk country (see link below)
3. Leave guests at home, if possible.
4. After checking in with the Front Desk, you can wait in your car and we'll call or text you when the physician is ready to see you.

We are taking the following measures:

1. We have increased our facility hygiene procedures (examples: sanitizing waiting room chairs, exam rooms, door handles, etc.)
2. We've reduced number of chairs in the waiting room
3. Increased distance between chairs in both our waiting room and infusion

We encourage patients to keep their scheduled appointments and maintain treatment schedule, unless instructed otherwise by your physician. We will continue to update you regularly.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/after-travel-precautions.html>

Appendix E

*Front Door, Lobby, Infusion Suite, & Exam Room Flyers*



**Patients with COVID-19 have experienced mild to severe respiratory illness.**

**Symptoms\* can include**

**FEVER**



**COUGH**



**\*Symptoms may appear 2-14 days after exposure.**

**SHORTNESS OF BREATH**



**Seek medical advice if you develop symptoms, and have been in close contact with a person known to have COVID-19 or if you live in or have recently been in an area with ongoing spread of COVID-19.**



**For more information: [www.cdc.gov/COVID19-symptoms](http://www.cdc.gov/COVID19-symptoms)**

# Stop the Spread of Germs

Help prevent the spread of respiratory viruses like COVID-19 and flu.

## What are the symptoms?



Fever



Cough



Shortness of Breath

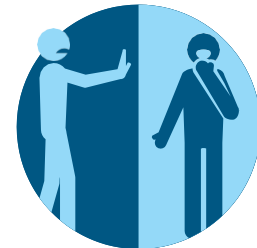
## How is it prevented?



Wash hands often



Avoid touching eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands



Avoid contact with sick people



Stay home while you are sick; avoid others



Cover mouth/nose with a tissue or sleeve when coughing or sneezing



Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces