



COVID 19 Pandemic & Disease Modifying Drugs

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The COVID-19 pandemic has changed many things for all of us, especially those with serious autoimmune conditions, many of whom are asking if they should stop disease-modifying drug treatments because of the virus. Those newly diagnosed with a serious autoimmune condition—for whom disease-modifying drugs have increased risk of infection as a potential side effect—are asking if taking those drugs will increase their risk of severe pneumonia and cytokine storm that can come with COVID-19. In this article I will review the factors to consider if you are currently taking disease-modifying drug treatments and what to consider if you are newly diagnosed with a serious autoimmune condition. I will also suggest steps everyone who has a serious autoimmune condition should take right now, as we face the COVID 19 pandemic.

» What if I was just diagnosed with a serious autoimmune condition and have not yet started a disease-modifying medication?

The answer to this question depends on the severity of your current disease symptoms. You may need to take steroids to treat an acute relapse or severe underlying symptoms. Then your medical team should assess the severity of current symptoms, labs, and imaging results to understand how urgently you should begin disease-modifying drugs and how potent those drugs should be. More neurologists and autoimmune specialists are telling all of their newly diagnosed patients that improving diet quality and health behaviors are a top priority for managing their disease. Regardless of whether disease-modifying drug treatments are prescribed, everyone with autoimmune conditions will have a much better outcome if they adopt health-promoting diet and lifestyle choices as a key part of their treatment and wellness plan. My advice is to begin the Wahls Protocol® immediately. Ask your medical team if it is safe to follow up every three months and wait to assess if your symptoms and disease activity can be managed with diet and lifestyle changes or if medication is needed. During this pandemic, more specialists and more patients are willing to use an aggressive diet and lifestyle approach to wellness, such as the Wahls Protocol®, and delay or avoid immune-

suppressing medication. Even if your current symptoms and disease activity are so severe that disease-modifying drug treatment is warranted, improved diet and health behaviors are advised. See the last section for more details.

» **Does taking disease-modifying drugs for your autoimmune condition(s) increase your risk of COVID-19 infection?**

It depends on the medication. First, nearly all disease-modifying drug treatments for autoimmune conditions have increased risk of infections as a possible side effect. This is logical -- any drug that inhibits your immune cells' ability to damage your own cells also inhibits your immune cells' ability to fight and contain bacterial and viral infections. That means you are more likely to have a larger viral load if you are ultimately infected with COVID-19. A larger viral load may make you more vulnerable to the more severe complications of COVID-19. That is why people taking immune-suppressing medications are listed as one of the patient groups more likely to have a severe pneumonia and potentially need intensive care and a ventilator if infected. Different immune-suppressing medications will have different impacts on the specific cytokines that may contribute to COVID-19 severity, but at this time we do not know exactly how each disease-modifying drug treatment will impact the risk of developing severe complications of COVID-19.

» **Should I stop my disease-modifying drug treatments?**

Do not preemptively stop disease-modifying drugs to lower your risk of getting COVID-19. Neurologists and other autoimmune specialists are emphatically telling their patients to stay on their disease-modifying drugs. Abruptly stopping disease-modifying drugs markedly increases the risk of severe rebound or worsening of autoimmune symptoms. It may also increase the risk for severe worsening of the production of the inflammasome molecule NLRP3, as well as cytokine molecules IL1b and IL18, which, for those who contract COVID-19, increases the risk of a cytokine storm and the need for intensive care. For these reasons, this is not the time to abruptly stop disease-modifying drug treatment. It will definitely make it more likely you'll experience severe worsening of your autoimmune disease and may put you at greater risk of severe complications of COVID-19 if you are infected.

» What can I do to lower my risk of severe complications of COVID-19?

There are two things to focus on:

The first is to reduce the risk of transmission by washing your hands, not touching your face, and keeping six feet away from other people. This markedly slows the spread of the disease, and increases your chances of not being infected.

The second thing to do is improve your overall health and vitality by improving diet quality and associated health behaviors. Our public health and infectious disease experts are predicting that 50 to 90% of everyone in our communities, countries, and the world will eventually acquire this virus before the infection burns itself out. That means we will all likely eventually get it. But we do want to slow the spread, which helps protect medical workers and prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed with patients they do not have enough beds for. Handwashing is key to slowing the spread. We also need to protect ourselves by doing a better job with diet quality and health behaviors. This means cutting out junk food, eliminating or greatly reducing added sugars and sweetened beverages, and eating more vegetables. Our neurology and autoimmune specialists are telling their patients it is vital to improve the quality of their diet, stop smoking, and add a stress-reducing practice. Integrative and functional medicine practitioners who care for autoimmune patients are stressing diet quality, stress reduction, sleep, and gentle exercise. Basically, they want their autoimmune patients to adopt the Wahls Protocol® approach.

» Why is improving diet quality and health behaviors hard?

Our brains are wired to crave salt, sugar, fat, inactivity, and pleasure. As a society we have been very effective at creating foods and products to cater to those wired desires. Creating new health-promoting habits and extinguishing disease-promoting habits is hard work for most people. Dropping the standard American diet may lead to headaches, malaise, and cravings for those familiar foods and flavors. We are surrounded by products and people that tempt us to continue disease-promoting behaviors. Some people can successfully make diet and health behavior changes by reading a book and being inspired by friends and family. More often, the person can only implement the changes partway. External support can make a real difference.

» Athletes, students and business owners know why support helps. Do you?

Most of us understand that working with a coach or mentor improves performance. Athletes perform better by working with coaches and trainers. Students do better academically when they work with a tutor. Business owners do better when they have a mentor. And patients who want to change their health behaviors will do better working with a team who has experience helping thousands of people change their habits. More physicians and patients are recognizing that getting more support as patients work to improve their health behaviors improves their success. Patients who can adopt and sustain the diet and lifestyle choices we teach in our various programs experience more energy, better mood, and higher quality of life.

We use tools and education to support people as they eliminate disease-promoting diet and lifestyle choices. This is what I do in my clinic and in our clinical trials. We help people understand the links between diet, health behaviors, and their current symptoms and health challenges. Then we support them in developing a plan that will empower them to begin transforming their diet and lifestyle choices and habits from disease-promoting to health-promoting. We provide several levels of support to patients and their families for this journey, both in individual and group settings, for varying lengths of time, at varying costs. These options will help you be more successful at improving your health, so buy the level of support that is right for you and your family.

Clinical Trials:

“Dietary Approaches to Treating Multiple Sclerosis Related Fatigue” is still recruiting study subjects!
Contact
MSDietStudy@healthcare.uiowa.edu
for more information.

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