

30th June 2020

UPDATED GUIDANCE FOR RHEUMATOLOGY PATIENTS WHO HAVE PREVIOUSLY RECEIVED A SHIELDING LETTER

An individual copy of advice will be sent by post to those who previously received a shielding letter from Northern Trust Rheumatology Department

First of all we would like to thank you for following the shielding advice and staying at home over this past few months, we know what a sacrifice it has been to stay apart from family and friends, but your actions have played an important role in keeping you safe.

As a result of our combined efforts, the risk of coming into contact with Covid 19 in Northern Ireland is now much lower. **If the risk continues to remain low, the Chief Medical Officer's assessment is that, from 31 July 2020, you will no longer need to follow the current shielding advice.**

In the interim and because of the lower risk, from 6 July, the Department of Health are also introducing some further easements to the current shielding guidance, and these are outlined below.

EASEMENTS FROM 6 JULY

From 6 July, people who are following the shielding advice will now be able to meet up to six people outside of their home, as long as social distancing is strictly observed.

If you are shielding alone, you can also form a support bubble with one other household. Where you form a bubble:

- social distancing is not required with the other household in your bubble; this will allow you to visit, stay over and spend more time with the second household;
- the second household can be of any size; and
- both households should not be part of more than one bubble and should continue to socially distance outside the bubble.

You can find more information on support bubbles here

www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations-guidance-and-what-they-mean-you

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER 31 JULY?

After 31 July, providing the Covid-19 risk remains low, you will not have to shield. That will mean your personal "lockdown" will no longer apply.

However, you must continue to follow public health advice at all times and be really strict about social distancing and washing your hands.

Even though the risk of coming into contact with the virus is much lower, you still need to be careful because you remain more vulnerable than the general population. So you must follow the advice that is given to people who are deemed generally vulnerable, for example people with asthma or people over 70. This is about minimising any risk as much as possible, being aware that all contacts with the outside world must be managed really carefully.

Keep your distance, wash your hands, don't touch your face, avoid touching hard surfaces if you are out. Wherever possible, avoid enclosed spaces where social distancing is hard to maintain – such as public transport and shops.

It is important to remember that because of your underlying condition, Covid-19 will remain a threat to you. At the same time, it is accepted that shielding has been really difficult and being stuck indoors indefinitely is bad for mental and physical health. What we all have to do in these difficult times is try to strike the right balance.

You can get more advice at this website: www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-vulnerable-people

For many of you, the pause to shielding is very welcome news. However, we know that you might also have some concerns. You have been shielding for many weeks and it is natural to feel a little apprehensive about this change.

You may want to consider making a plan for this now, to think about how your daily routine might change and what or who might help you to adjust.

Although you will no longer need to shield after 31 July, we appreciate that you may continue to need support in a range of areas. In this letter, we have set out where you can go for help and support.

DAY TO DAY SUPPORT

You may have been getting help with a range of areas, including food and medicine. This section of the letter gives you information about what will be available up to and after 31 July.

If you have needed help to access food, you may have been receiving a **food box**. We can confirm that these will continue, for those who need it, until 31 July.

In addition, you can still sign up for **priority online food delivery** with Asda, Iceland, Sainsbury's or Tesco, until 31 July. To register for this service you should visit: nidirect.gov.uk/services/register-priority-online-food-delivery.

Other support services, such as **medicine deliveries** and the **Covid 19 Community Helpline** will continue after 31 July. You can also continue to contact the Helpline to be connected to other means of support, including local volunteer supported shopping and local or community food support organisations.

Telephone: 0808 802 0020
Email: covid19@adviceni.net
Text: ACTION to 81025
Website: www.adviceni.net/coronavirus

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL BEING

If you find that you are feeling anxious or worried we have a range of tools available online to help you with this.

The **Minding Your Head** website contains information to help you look after your own mental health and to support others. It contains a directory of mental health services in Northern Ireland, as well as links to online support such as the HSC Apps Library, which provides a range of safe and approved apps for you to download for support with issues such as stress and sleep management. Free online Stress Control classes are also available for everyone. For further information visit: www.mindingyourhead.info

In addition, tailored information and self-help guides from local mental health and wellbeing charities are available at the **Covid 19 Virtual Wellbeing Hub** at www.covidwellbeingni.info. These resources are designed to help promote positive mental health and wellbeing both during and after the Covid 19 Pandemic.

If you would like to speak to someone, you can still contact your GP, or if you are in distress or despair, you can call **Lifeline** on 0808 808 8000 where you can speak to a trained counsellor. This service is available 24/7 and is free from all NI landlines and mobiles.

WORK AND CHILDCARE

The need to shield may have meant you could not go to work, or you had to work from home. You may have been furloughed under the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme or may have been in receipt of Statutory Sick Pay (SSP).

If it has been possible for you to work from home while shielding, you should continue to do this. However, if your employer has taken the proper measures to ensure social distancing in your place of work, and you can travel to work in a way which allows for social distancing, the fact that you have been shielding is not by itself a reason not to return to work.

As you are still considered vulnerable, if your workplace cannot follow guidance on social distancing at work or you cannot travel to work in a way which allows for social distancing, you should tell your employer you need to follow government advice and that you must stay at home until it is possible for you to observe social distancing both at work and during travel to work.

If you have been furloughed, you should speak to your employer about your particular circumstances and whether it is appropriate for your furloughing arrangement to continue. Full guidance on the scheme is available at: www.gov.uk/guidance/checkwhich-employees-you-can-put-on-furlough-to-use-the-coronavirus-job-retentionscheme

If you have been receiving SSP as a person who is shielding, after 31 July, you will no longer automatically be entitled to this.

If you feel that there are other reasons why you cannot return to work, you should discuss these with your doctor and your employer.

If you are planning a return to work, you may need to some help to arrange childcare. For the latest advice and links to support, you should visit www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-about-childcare.

Further information about Covid 19 and working can be found here: nibusinessinfo.co.uk/content/coronavirus-workplace-safety-guidance-and-priority-sector-list-published

If you have concerns about social distancing in your workplace or require further information you can visit the Health and Safety Executive (HSENI)'s website www.hseni.gov.uk or call 0800 0320 121 to speak to someone about it.

You should be aware that if you refuse to attend work without a valid reason, it could result in disciplinary action. However, employers must be especially careful and take reasonable steps for anyone in their workforce who is in a vulnerable group.

Your doctor cannot deal with employment issues for you.

Where you find that you have a disagreement with your employer, which you are unable to resolve, you should consider contacting the Labour Relations Agency (LRA). The LRA Workplace Information Service is available on 03300 555 300 for free, confidential and impartial information. Much useful information is also provided at lra.org.uk/covid-19-advice-employers-and-employees#section-845.

In addition, the Law Centre NI provides free, independent, specialist legal advice on employment rights and has established a dedicated COVID 19 response team for COVID 19 related employment rights matters. The Law Centre can be contacted on their advice line on 028 9024 4401 or by email: employmentadvice@lawcentreni.org

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Depending on your circumstances, financial assistance is available to those impacted by the Covid-19 outbreak through Universal Credit, new style Job seekers allowance and new style Employment support allowance. Further information can be found at www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-and-benefits

Anyone who finds themselves in in a crisis situation can apply to the Discretionary Support scheme for assistance with short-term living expenses. Further details on Discretionary Support including the new Discretionary Support COVID-19 Living Expenses Grant are available at www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/extra-financial-support.

NEXT STEPS

We will only write to you again if the Chief Medical officer's assessment changes. The information in this letter is correct at the time of going to print. However, as

conditions in the community change, so too will the advice and you should check the relevant links above, or call the helpline, for any updated guidance closer to 31 July.

We understand how difficult this period has been for many of you, and that it will take some time to adjust. The Covid 19 pandemic has made huge demands on all of us, but perhaps most of all those who have been shielding. We am grateful to you for the part that you have played, and I wish you well for the weeks and months ahead.

Yours sincerely

Rheumatology Department, Northern Health & Social Care Trust

<http://www.northerntrust.hscni.net/services/rheumatology>