

COVID-19: A Guide for Inpatients and Families

What is coronavirus or COVID-19?

Coronaviruses are a family of viruses that we have known about for a long time. There are seven types, with most of them only causing a mild respiratory illness/cold symptoms such as sore throat, cough, or congestion. Two of the coronaviruses SERS and MERS can cause more serious disease, especially in people who have underlying serious medical conditions.

COVID-19 is the name of a new coronavirus, first discovered in December of 2019 in Wuhan, China. We are still learning about this virus. We know that it is contagious. About 80 percent of patients who develop COVID-19 infection will have a mild respiratory illness: cough, sore throat, mild fever. However, about 20% of those infected will have a more severe illness that may require hospitalization.

It is important to recognize that the overwhelming majority of people who are being treated for COVID-19 in the hospital will recover completely.

How can the hospital help me recover?

If you, or your loved one, are in the hospital, it is because your doctor knows you will benefit from the additional support the hospital can provide. There are treatments that can be provided in the hospital that are different from what can be provided at home. We will explain some of these things in this guide.

Our first priority at the hospital is your health and safety. We are making sure we protect you and our staff. Your care team will prepare a plan to care for your unique medical and personal needs while in the hospital.

What is an isolation room? Why are patients with COVID-19 infections admitted to this type of room?

COVID-19 is contagious, especially if someone is coughing or has respiratory secretions.

Isolation rooms are routinely used in hospitals to prevent the spread of contagious diseases.

What can I expect once in my hospital room?

When your care team enters and exits your room they will be wearing protective gear including gowns, masks, and eye shields. This is a common practice in hospitals when managing contagious illnesses.

You will most likely be given oxygen to help your breathing be more comfortable. This will come from a thin tube called a nasal cannula that has two prongs that fit under your nose where oxygen can flow. Oxygen can also be delivered through a facemask.

You may be attached to a monitor that will record your vital signs. These are things like your temperature, heart rate, respiratory rate and blood pressure. These measurements are viewed on a screen outside of your room at the nurse's station. This type of monitoring is very common in hospitals.

There are specific medications that you may be prescribed to help you recover from your illness. Your doctor and your care team will explain to you exactly what medications are being used and how they will help.

Your room will have a telephone a television and a bathroom. You will have a call bell that can help you to reach a member of your care team at any time.

Can my family visit?

We understand how difficult this may be for patients and families but, unfortunately, because of the size of the COVID-19 pandemic and the risk of spreading the illness, RWJBarnabas Health hospitals have a no visitor policy (with very limited exceptions).

What can I do?

We are all committed to provide you with the best care possible in a safe, secure environment to promote healing.

- Describe all symptoms in as much detail as possible.
- Report any pain and difficulty breathing.
- Ask questions. If you do not understand, ask for clarification.
- Write down questions that you may forget in the moment so that you can ask your care team when they visit.
- Choose a representative from your family and friends to be the primary point person for your care team to whom they can relay messages.

Can you give me guidance about nutrition and hydration while in the hospital?

Maintaining adequate nutrition and hydration is important to wellbeing and promoting health. Some illnesses and medications can decrease your appetite.

- Let your care team know your meal preferences, dietary restrictions, and whether or not you need assistance during meals.
- Do not skip meals. Make an effort and eat as much as you can from your tray.
- Chew your food thoroughly.
- Drink water throughout the day to keep your body hydrated.
- If possible, eat your meal sitting up in a chair or, if you are in bed, be sure the head of your head is elevated at least 45 degrees.
- Nutritional drinks are a supplement to complement your daily nutrition. Nutritional drinks such as Ensure meal replacements are meant to add to what you are eating and augment your daily intake of nutrients. It is better to drink nutritional drinks between meals, that way you are still able to eat your meal and not feel too full all at once.

I am feeling nervous. What can I do to feel better?

It is normal to feel stressed, confused and anxious during a hospitalization. It can feel overwhelming at times, especially when the ability to have visitors is limited.

- Consider lessening the time you spend watching or listening/reading to media coverage that may be upsetting.
- Draw on the skills you have used in the past to help you manage challenging emotions: meditation, guided imagery, relaxation techniques, yoga, watching a movie, or having a phone conversation with someone calm and reliable may be helpful.
- Reach out to your care team if you are feeling overwhelmed and having difficulty managing how you are feeling. Oftentimes, reassurance from someone involved in your care can help to make things easier.

Can you guide me through some breathing and relaxation techniques?

Deep breathing

- Sit or lie down comfortably.
- Close your eyes.
- Take a normal breath in then and exhale.
- Take a deeper breath, slowly allowing it to fill your belly. Slowly exhale.
- Continue with slow and comfortable deep breaths.
- Concentrate on each breath, allowing each breath to center your focus and calm your mind.

Visualization

Close your eyes and imagine your restful place. Picture as vividly as you can everything you see, hear, smell, taste, and feel in that place. Just “looking” at it in your mind’s eye like you would a photograph is not enough. Visualization works best if you incorporate as many sensory details as possible.

For example, if you are thinking about a dock on a quiet lake:

- See the sun setting over the water.
- Hear the birds singing.
- Smell the pine trees.
- Feel the cool water on your bare feet.
- Taste the fresh, clean air.

Enjoy the feeling of your worries drifting away as you slowly explore your restful place. When you are ready, gently open your eyes and come back to the present.

Do not worry if lose track focus of where you are during a visualization session. This is normal. You may also experience feelings of heaviness in your limbs, muscle twitches, or yawning. Again, these are normal responses, and similar to what happens when we relax and get ready for sleep.

When I recover from my COVID-19 infection and return home am I at risk to get the infection again?

This question is currently under investigation, but most of the evidence points to no. If you have already had COVID-19, it appears unlikely that you will get it again.

I am a close contact of a patient hospitalized with COVID-19. What should I do?

Be sure to talk to the health care team for the most current recommendations in this scenario in order to limit the risk of exposure to others and spread of the virus. This is important even if you are feeling healthy.

When can I go home?

Your health care team is working on a plan aimed at helping you recover and return to your home. Once your care team determines that it is safe for you to leave the hospital, the team will begin to coordinate your discharge with you and your family. Your care team will discuss with you and your family where the best place is for you to go after your hospitalization. Some patients will continue recovering at home. Others might need continued nursing care at a nursing home or rehabilitation facility. Your team will also focus on issues particular to you: making sure that you have access to medication and food, for example.

It is important to recognize that recovery takes time, even after discharge. It is important to follow all of your discharge instructions carefully and take all medications as prescribed. Lastly, eat well, drink water, stay as active as possible, and rest to help your body get better and heal. Once you are home, you will also need to follow up with your primary care provider, either in the office, or more likely through a telehealth visit. Your health care team can help you to arrange your follow up before discharge from the hospital.

When I recover from my COVID-19 infection and return home can I get it again in the future? This question is currently under investigation, but most of the evidence points to no. If you have already had COVID-19, it appears unlikely that you will get it again.