

Prevent Getting Sick from Visitors

For in-patients (staying in hospital) at the Princess Margaret Cancer Centre

Read this pamphlet to learn:

- What is a respiratory virus
- How can visitors with a respiratory virus harm you
- How do respiratory viruses spread
- How can you prevent getting sick from visitors



What is a respiratory virus?

A respiratory virus is a sickness that affects your lungs and breathing. This includes any sickness that affects the nose and throat.

There are many types of respiratory viruses. The most common types are:

- Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)
- Influenza (flu)
- Para-influenza
- Metapneumovirus
- Common cold
- COVID

Note: To learn more about why people with cancer should get a COVID vaccine, read our pamphlet [COVID-19 Vaccines and Cancer](https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Health_Topics/Documents/What_You_Need_to_Know_About_COVID19_Vaccines_cancer.pdf).

(https://www.uhn.ca/PatientsFamilies/Health_Information/Health_Topics/Documents/What_You_Need_to_Know_About_COVID19_Vaccines_cancer.pdf)

How can visitors with a respiratory virus harm you?

Cancer and cancer treatment (like chemotherapy, biotherapy and radiation treatment) weakens your body's immune system (helps fight infections). This means you have a greater chance of getting very sick from respiratory viruses that may not have harmed you before cancer. Sometimes this can lead to death.

Tell your friends and family not to visit you at the Princess Margaret if they have symptoms (signs) of a respiratory virus.

Symptoms include:

- fever
- runny nose
- congestion (stuffy nose, throat or chest)
- sneezing
- sore or scratchy throat
- cough or wheezing
- headache

Visitors with any of these symptoms can:

- Make you sicker and force you to stay at the Princess Margaret for a longer time
- Cause new health problems that can lead to death

Respiratory viruses often feel and look like common cold or flu-like symptoms. Your friends and family may notice these symptoms and think they have allergies. They may notice no symptoms at all and still have a respiratory virus in its early stages.

Tell your friends and family to keep track of any changes to their body or how they feel. This will help them to know if they have symptoms.

How long symptoms last will depend on their immune system and how strong the virus is.

How do respiratory viruses spread?

Respiratory viruses spread through droplets (germs that travel by air). This means the viruses spread when people who have them cough, sneeze, touch or breathe near you or on the surfaces you touch (like doorknobs, sink handles or counter tops).

People are most likely to spread a respiratory virus during the first 3 to 8 days they have it. Some people can spread a virus for as long as 4 weeks.

It takes most people about 3 to 5 days to heal from a virus.

How can you prevent getting sick from visitors?

Help keep all patients safe. Follow the 4 steps below to prevent friends and family from getting you and other patients sick.

1. Tell friends and family not to visit if they or someone in their household has symptoms.

If a friend or family member has symptoms, tell them to use the telephone, email or Skype to keep in touch until they feel better.

Use the script below to know how to talk to your loved ones about when they can visit you:

When a loved one asks if they can visit you:

- “Cancer and cancer treatment has made my immune system weak. This means it’s easy for me to get very sick from visitors who have a common cold or flu. Do you have any signs of a cold or flu?”

If your loved one answers yes:

- “Being around people who feel even a little bit sick can harm me and make me sicker. Help keep me safe by not visiting until you have fully gotten over your cold or flu.”
- “We can keep in touch over the phone, email or Skype.”
- “Call my in-patient unit and speak to a nurse before you visit. Tell her you’ve just gotten over a cold or flu and want to visit.”

2. Ask friends and family to wash their hands with soap and water before visiting.

This will help them to stop germs from spreading.

Visitors should use hand sanitizer often. Hand sanitizer is placed outside each in-patient clinic and patient room at the Princess Margaret.

3. Tell visitors to wear a mask if they are visiting. If visitors are recovering from a viral infection, they should not visit until they have no symptoms for 24 hours.

Visitors can pick up a free mask at the front desk of your in-patient unit, or at the hospital's Information Desk (main floor of the Princess Margaret, near the Murray Street entrance).



4. Tell visitors to stay home if they are unsure.

Visitors should stay home if they are unsure if they are well enough to visit. They should call your in-patient unit and tell a nurse or doctor about their symptoms. Ask if it is safe for you to visit.

The development of patient education resources is supported by the Princess Margaret Cancer Foundation.



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