

Self-Care During the COVID-19 Pandemic

These are worrying times, with the presence of COVID-19 in our society - a potentially dangerous virus. We are all familiar with the best methods of not catching it- hand washing, social distancing and self -isolation etc. What seems to be less talked about is how to minimise the chances of being seriously affected if you are unfortunate enough to develop symptoms.

As time goes on, researchers have been able to analyse the data gained from coronavirus cases. It is clear that obesity and poor diet are emerging as one of the biggest risk factors for a severe response to Covid19 infection that can no longer be ignored. Low levels of Vitamin D are also associated with a worse outcome if infected. If you would like to know how you can potentially reduce your own personal risk, then read on.....

You may or may not know what your blood sugar or cholesterol levels are but in these times of COVID-19, it is likely that most people could work to improve theirs. The best indicator is a simple test that you can do at home to look for the most important sign of poor metabolic health - central obesity – the appearance of a “beer belly” (indicating fat around the abdominal organs).

Here’s how to check yours! - Cut a length of string to the same length as your height. Fold it in half and wrap it around your tummy at the level of your tummy button. Don’t cheat by sucking your tummy in! If the ends meet or overlap, then you are much less likely to have poor metabolic health. If the ends don’t meet (particularly if there is a big gap between the ends) you may be at increased risk and you may wish to consider taking some action.

Don’t be too smug if you are not overweight! It is possible to have a “normal” weight / body mass index (BMI) and still have poor metabolic health. These individuals are often known as TOFIs (Thin on the Outside, Fat on the Inside).

If your string ends don’t meet - the good news is that you can actively do something to reduce your risk! Eating well can help in many ways – it can help reduce weight, reduce blood pressure and blood sugar and improve cholesterol profile - within just a few weeks in some cases. COVID-19 is not going to disappear any time soon and we believe that it is possible to reduce the risk of serious complications by eating well. There is no time like the present to get started!

How to eat to improve your immune system & general long term health

The first step is to minimise sugar in your diet. That’s not just table sugar, cakes & biscuits etc but also “natural” sugar in fruit juices and smoothies (there are plenty of healthier sources of vitamin C such as broccoli and peppers).

There is a lot of added sugar in processed food. Processed food found in packets with more than 5 ingredients on the label need to be generally avoided. If anything has a “low fat” label then the chances are that it’s high in sugar – so full fat options are a better option here e.g. plain full fat yoghurts, full fat or semi-skimmed milk.

Starchy carbohydrates are also best reduced to a minimum. Starch is very quickly turned to sugar, which causes your blood sugar to rise and this excess sugar is soon turned to belly fat. These starches are found in bread, potatoes, breakfast cereals (yes that does include porridge!), rice and pasta. It is better to eat non-starchy vegetables, and quality protein from eggs, meat and fish, alongside pulses, nuts, seeds, and full fat dairy. Your hunger will be far better controlled using these foods and you will be less likely to have the urge to snack 1-2 hours after a meal.

Seed oils (such as sunflower, rapeseed & corn oil) appear to cause inflammation within the body and should be avoided. Olive oil, butter and lard are all fine.

Changing lifelong eating habits is not easy and it does take some determination and good sources of information. In our opinion, the most comprehensive free resource on healthy eating available is the [diet doctor website](#). We have also developed [our own low carb website](#) and a [meal planner](#) in an attempt to condense the basic information needed to help people get started on a healthy diet. A real food, low carb lifestyle is not just for weight loss, but for improving all aspects of health and strengthening the immune system.

We are really impressed with our patients who have already adopted our advice and they have managed to lose over a tonne of weight between them in a year. Whilst we haven't been measuring their belly circumferences, we are confident that there has been a huge improvement there too. It is amazing how many of these patients have told us how well they feel, with so much more energy than they had before. Many of our patients have been able to stop their diabetes medication (including insulin in some cases) and blood pressure medication as a result of their weight loss and healthier lifestyle.

If you suffer with any significant health conditions - particularly if you are take medication for diabetes or high blood pressure – then please speak to a doctor or nurse before you make this sort of change. You may find very quickly that you no longer need your medications and may need to stop taking them so that your blood pressure or blood sugar does not drop too low. Please also discuss with a doctor first if you are pregnant, breastfeeding, under 18, or have struggled with any type of eating disorder.

Vitamin D – the Sunshine Vitamin

There has long been evidence that vitamin D protects against viruses, especially respiratory ones, including the common cold. Vitamin D increases the production of antiviral proteins and decreases cytokines, the immune molecules that can cause a “storm” of dangerous inflammation. It has long been suspected that most people's low vitamin D levels in late winter partly explain the seasonal peaking of flu epidemics, and rising vitamin D levels in spring partly explain their sudden ending. Vitamin D is made by ultraviolet light falling on the skin, so many people living in Northern climates (the UK included) have deficient levels by the end of winter. People at even higher risk are those who are older, have darker skin, or regularly cover up their skin with clothing.

Whereas there are currently no results from randomised controlled trials to conclusively prove that vitamin D beneficially affects Covid-19 outcomes, there is strong circumstantial evidence of associations between vitamin D and the severity of Covid-19 response.

Oily fish and eggs can help to maintain our levels when eaten in large enough volumes, but sunlight or supplements remain the most effective means of increasing levels of Vitamin D (it is difficult for us to get the recommended amount of Vitamin D from food alone).

Now that spring is here (and we have been particularly fortunate with the weather of late) – our first recommendation would be to get outside! Ensure your face and forearms are exposed for 10-20 minutes every day whenever possible and always remember to cover up or protect your skin if you are out in the sun for long periods to reduce the risk of skin damage and skin cancer.

With regards to supplementation – Public Health England currently recommends that the population takes daily Vitamin D supplementation throughout the winter months of October to April every year. During the current lockdown they are also advising people to continue with supplements if they are unable to get outside on a regular basis.

Vitamin D can be picked up cheaply and easily from pharmacies, supermarkets and online shopping sites such as Amazon (we are unable to provide it on prescription). We would suggest a minimum daily dose of 10mcg or 400 iu per day. Anywhere up to 100mcg a day (4000iu) appears safe used long term. Children should be given Vitamin D at a dose of 10mcg or 400iu per day until the age of 5 in all cases, but consideration should be given to additional supplementation over the winter months in older children.

Please take care of yourself by getting outdoors, enjoying the sunshine and eating nutritious, non-processed foods!

Freshwell Health Centre continues to be open all our usual hours for your health care needs so do get in touch if you have any questions or aren't sure if this approach will work for you.

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