

HIV Service New Year Letter 2021

I heard it said early in the COVID-19 pandemic that although we are all in the same storm, we are in different boats. I can't begin to understand how the past year has affected you all as individuals, families and communities but I know that we have all faced challenges, change and loss. I'm also aware of and saddened by the unique impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people living with HIV where memories of stigma, contagion and contamination are still felt acutely. With the hope of effective vaccines being rolled out I am cautiously optimistic that this time next year we will still be recovering from our Christmas parties. Please accept our sincere best wishes for you and yours for a brighter 2021.

What's the lie of the land?

At the time of writing, the second wave of COVID-19 is well and truly underway and the numbers are still climbing. We are doing far more testing in the general population which increases the number of people diagnosed with the virus but we know that the high numbers are not just a result of lots of testing. The proportion of tests that are positive is increasing and hospital wards are filling up with people with the typical COVID-19 disease. Tayside has not escaped the second wave and the COVID wards are busy. It is anticipated that cases may continue to go up for a couple of weeks yet due to the effect of mixing over the holiday season. The Infectious Diseases doctors and pharmacists that you may know well are busy managing the COVID-19 patients and wards, supervising the junior doctors and leading the COVID-19 response. We know the COVID patients are in the best of hands and we are so grateful for our brilliant colleagues. In more good news, we have learned how to treat COVID-19 better and so less people are requiring intensive care and less people are dying from COVID-19 compared to the first wave. The best news is that the COVID-19 vaccines are being rolled out across Tayside (more below) as we speak and my left arm is still complaining from the first dose (I was very brave).

What more do we know about COVID-19 in people living with HIV?

There have been a few studies looking to see if people living with HIV are more likely to get COVID-19 and whether they get more severe disease than people without HIV. The studies have shown different results – some have reported that people with HIV are at higher risk of severe disease and some studies show they are not at higher risk. It's not clear yet why these studies are reporting different results and more research is on-going. Some studies only have very small numbers of people and so it is difficult to draw conclusions from these. Some studies are from countries with very different healthcare systems and haven't taken into account other underlying diseases, HIV treatment, viral loads and CD4s (immune system) – it's difficult to apply these results to a UK setting. The British HIV Association, the European AIDS Clinical Society, the Terrence Higgins Trust and the International AIDS society all currently advise that people living with HIV are at no greater risk from severe COVID-19 than people without HIV unless they have a very low CD4 count (less than 50) or have had a severe AIDS-related infection or disease in the last 6 months. We have contacted anyone whose HIV results in them being "Clinically Extremely Vulnerable". If you are Clinically Extremely Vulnerable for a different reason (like COPD or heart disease) your GP will have added you to this list. We strongly recommend that everyone observes the COVID-19 restrictions and stay at home, wash your hands, wear face coverings and keep your distance from people you don't live with.

COVID-19 vaccines for people living with HIV

Should I take the COVID vaccine?

The short answer is yes! The long answer is yeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!

Has the vaccine been studied in people living with HIV?

Both the Pfizer vaccine trials and the AstraZeneca/Oxford vaccine trials included people living with HIV but in small numbers. The results of these small groups (and other small groups of people with chronic diseases) are yet to be reported.

Is the vaccine going to work in people living with HIV?

All of the approved vaccines offer very high levels of protection compared to other vaccines. We know that people with HIV sometimes don't respond as well to vaccines. Although it is possible that the vaccine isn't quite 70-90% effective in this group of people, it is expected to offer good protection. As more evidence becomes available it could be that guidance changes and in particular studies are looking at who might need booster doses further down the line. The Department of Health recommends that all people living with HIV are vaccinated against COVID-19 and so I would strongly encourage you to accept the vaccine when you receive an invitation from your GP.

Is the vaccine safe to use in people living with HIV?

This vaccine is safe to use for everyone unless you have known allergies to the ingredients. None of the three approved vaccines contain any live virus and so can't give you COVID-19 or any other infection. There is no evidence that people with HIV experience any more side-effects than people who don't have HIV.

The patient information leaflets in the three currently approved vaccines (Pfizer, AstraZeneca/Oxford and Moderna) list a weakened immune system as a precaution for use but this is not based on concerns about safety. It is simply because they haven't done large studies in people with immune system problems. In fact, the British HIV Association has asked Pfizer to remove the warning about HIV from their information leaflet as it isn't justified.

There are no animal products in any of the approved vaccines and no egg proteins. So they can be given to people who avoid certain products or food groups.

There are no interactions between the COVID-19 vaccines and any HIV medications. It won't have any effect on your medicines doing their job.

What's the bottom line?

The bottom line is that although we don't have specific studies on COVID-19 vaccines in people living with HIV (as well as other groups of people with chronic diseases), there is no reason to worry that it will cause you harm and we expect it will offer protection.

Will I get my COVID-19 vaccine any quicker because of my HIV?

I am aged 65 or older – you will get your vaccine based on your age (priority groups 1-5)

I am aged younger than 65 – because of your HIV infection you will get your vaccine earlier than just waiting for your age group (priority group 6). This group includes all people who have an “underlying condition” but are not considered Clinically Extremely Vulnerable. As long as your GP is aware that you have HIV, you will be assigned to the right priority group.

I have a CD4 less than 50 – you are in priority group 4 and will be vaccinated with the people aged 70 and older. We will ensure you are in the right priority group.

I have a CD4 50-200 – you will be added to priority group 4 if you have an additional high risk factor for COVID (like COPD). If you don't have an additional risk factor then you'll stay in priority group 6. We will ensure you are in the right priority group.

I don't know what my CD4 count is – don't worry – we do! You will be contacted if you are added to priority group 4. We will ensure you are in the right priority group. Please don't contact us to find out your CD4, we're quite short-staffed and can't respond to everyone.

I have a different disease making me Clinically Extremely Vulnerable – your GP will make sure you are in priority group 4. We can't help with this.

I am a health and social care worker – you are in priority groups 1 and 2 and your employer will make arrangements for your vaccine. We can't help with this.

Who will actually give me my vaccine? – all vaccines will be delivered either by GP surgeries or vaccination centres. We won't have a supply of COVID-19 vaccines.

Priority group	Risk group
1	Residents in a care home for older adults Staff working in care homes for older adults
2	All those 80 years of age and over Frontline Health and social care workers
3	All those 75 years of age and over
4	All those 70 years of age and over Clinically extremely vulnerable individuals (not including pregnant women and those under 16 years of age)
5	All those 65 years of age and over
6	Adults aged 16 to 65 years in an at-risk group (Table 3)
7	All those 60 years of age and over
8	All those 55 years of age and over
9	All those 50 years of age and over

How will I get my HIV care this year?

We still face some challenges in terms of return to “normal”. The East Block clinic is still being used for COVID work. We are still short-staffed with the Infectious Diseases doctors and pharmacist looking after COVID patients and some of our team are running the community COVID testing service. We also have to account for staff sickness and self-isolation. We are hopeful that for the remainder of the year we will provide care as follows:

Consultations

Most consultations will be done by telephone for stable patients. In the event we need to see you face-to-face this can be arranged in another out-patient clinic in the hospital.

Blood tests

Many of you will be delighted to hear that we will continue to do bloods annually for people who are stable on treatment. If we need to do any more frequent tests we will arrange them either at Ninewells Hospital or Royal Victoria Hospital, Beechgrove House (Perth) or at a variety of sites in Angus.

Getting your HIV medications

Medication can be collected from the main pharmacy at Ninewells Hospital and the satellite pharmacy at Perth Royal Infirmary. Although it isn't routine, we can arrange for medicines to be collected from Stracathro Hospital if that suits you. For those of you that collect your medicines every day/week/month at your local chemist this arrangement will continue.

When COVID rates are very high as they are now, we are discouraging people from leaving home and from coming to hospitals if they can avoid it and as such we will look to deliver medicines when we can. It may be that we have to prioritise this based on vulnerabilities and where people live. The Terrence Higgins Trust has offered to help us deliver medications but we would require your consent for this. We will contact you to gain your consent if we take up this offer.

Home Visits

Due to the risk of transmitting COVID-19 to you in your home, or the risk to our staff of getting COVID-19 we will only do home visits in exceptional circumstances and these will be agreed on a case-by-case basis taking into account the problem at hand and the COVID situation at the time.

Getting in touch with us

Although it is more difficult to see us in person, please know that we are able to be contacted. The best way to get in touch with us is by email. The email account is checked regularly and the emails sent to the most appropriate team member to deal with. We try to respond within 2 working days. You can also text us and we'll get back to you. If you give us a ring you may need to leave a message before we get back to you. All of our contact details are detailed below.

If you have any urgent medical issues or symptoms then it is best to contact your GP, an out-of-hours doctor or the Emergency Department if it is life-threatening. Your GP can contact the Infectious Diseases or Sexual Health Consultants directly through established referral pathways.

Sexual Health Check-up

If you would like a sexual health check-up then we can send you out a testing kit in the post or we can arrange to see you in the clinic if you have symptoms (contact details below). Drop Emma an email or a text and she will arrange this with you. You can also access free condoms by post via our website <https://www.sexualhealthtayside.org/sexual-health-relationships/contraception/condoms/>

Behind the scenes

We continue to hold a monthly “multi-disciplinary meeting” where we discuss treatment decisions for patients who need to start treatment, change treatment, have detectable viral loads or who are pregnant. That way you get the benefit of the experience and knowledge of a team of doctors, nurses and pharmacists. We also have a weekly “huddle” where we discuss any new problems that have arisen over the course of the week.

Who is on the other end of the phone anyway?

We know that speaking to us on the phone isn't the same as being seen in-person. Some of you much prefer the convenience of having your consultation from home, from your (safely parked) car or from the office store cupboard whereas some of you prefer to see us in person (we don't blame you!). Don't be afraid to ask who it is on the phone if we forgot to introduce ourselves.

Dr Sarah Allstaff – Sexual Health and HIV Consultant. That's me. I've been kicking about for 10 years so there is a good chance you've met me before.

Dr Ciara Cunningham – Sexual Health and HIV Consultant. She's been around for a long time but only in the HIV service for about 5 years. She is the one with an Irish accent who will be better known to Perth patients.

Dr Graham Leslie – Sexual Health and HIV Consultant. He's been part of the HIV team for 8 years and is "the big boss" up in Sexual Health.

Emma Gellatly – Advanced Nurse Practitioner. She's one of the newest members of the team and is capably running the whole show during this pandemic.

The Infectious Diseases Consultants sometimes like to do the occasional HIV clinic to taste a bit of normality and you may find yourself speaking to:

Dr Lynn Urquhart – she has been known to the service for many years as a trainee and now as a Consultant. She's also very involved with the medical school and medical education.

Dr Nik Rae – he was also a trainee with us before becoming a Consultant in the last few years. You may recall his sense of style.

Dr Jorge Rojas – he is the newest member of the HIV team having come to us from Madrid. If any of you are taking "Genvoya", please know that from now on I intend to pronounce it like Dr Rojas does and suggest you do too. (Using the "ch" sound from "Loch" – Ch-envoya)

The specialty registrars – registrars are qualified doctors who are on a path to becoming consultants. At the moment we have Dr Ali Wilson, Dr Katherine Cobb, Dr Neil Stevenson and Dr Helen Callaby training in Infectious Diseases.

Kirsteen Hill (our pharmacist) is still the longest serving member of our team. And thank goodness for that. She, and her colleague Debbie Guthrie, are supporting the COVID wards as well as keeping us all right.

Laura Shepherd is our patient coordinator although she is currently running the Community COVID Testing Service alongside **Stacey Aydin** our HIV nurse specialist. What a formidable team! Laura still has a finger in our pie for now and you can sometimes find her at the other end of a text, email or phone. We look forward to having Stacey back with us in the future.

Charlie Brown is a secretary with the Infectious Diseases Team but now has some dedicated time to support the HIV service so you may find Charlie at the end of the phone. Please be gentle with her as she finds her feet!

Our Contact Details

- Email account: Tay.arvservice@nhs.scot
- Mobile phone: 07768058301
- Landline: 01382 496554
- Sexual Health Clinic: 01382 425542

Where can I find out more about COVID-19 and HIV (including vaccines)?

- www.bhiva.org/Coronavirus-COVID-19
- i-base.info/covid-19/
- <https://youtu.be/RUPujuXh3NY> (great Q&A on Youtube about COVID vaccines for people living with HIV)

Where can I get general support for my mental health and for practical problems?

Mental health and emotional support:

- The listening service: sometimes life can become overwhelming. The listening service offers a safe space to talk and is run by NHS Tayside. If you would like a referral please send a request by text to Emma or you can call them directly on 01382 423110
- Insight counselling: a safe and confidential counselling service where people are listened to without judgement (01382 305706)
- Andys Man Club: peer support for men over 18: info@andysmanclub.co.uk
- Samaritans: freephone number: 116 123

Crisis support:

- Women's Aid: support for women who are experiencing domestic abuse and are seeking refuge accommodation Dundee: 01382 207099/Perth 0800 027 1234/Angus 01241 439437
- Police Scotland: phone 101
- Threat of homelessness: Dundee 01382 432001/Perth 01738 476000/Angus 03452 777 778

Practical and financial support:

- Money talk team: 0800 085 7145
- Citizens Advice: Dundee 01382 307494 or elsewhere 0800 0281456
- Terrence Higgins Trust: COVID19 emergency support for individuals living with HIV: <https://www.tht.org.uk/our-work/about-our-charity/scotland/covid-19-emergency-support>
- Advocacy service: support for adults over the age of 21 to exercise their right to have their views listened to and taken seriously (01382 205515)

We will try to keep you informed of changes over the course of the year but please understand that the situation can change quite quickly. Here's to 2021 and a return to "normal" or possibly an even better "new normal".

With best wishes,

Dr Sarah Allstaff, on behalf of the HIV team