

Safely Navigating COVID-19 for Those with Weakened Immune Systems

OSF HealthCare Newsroom

Shelli Dankoff – Media Relations Supervisor

In May, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said it was okay for people who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19 to stop wearing a mask in most situations. But for people living with cancer, rheumatoid arthritis or other autoimmune conditions, those who have received an organ transplant, and others who are considered immunocompromised, it might not be that simple.

“One of the successes within medicine within the last three or four decades has been treating numerous conditions with immunotherapies or manipulating immune systems that have allowed people to live much longer and have a higher quality of life from conditions that we couldn’t previously treat. The side effects from these medications are that a person’s immune system is weaker, and when they come in contact with an infection they can be at higher risk of having severe effects from the infection,” explains Doug Kasper, M.D., section head of infectious disease at the University of Illinois College of Medicine Peoria and a leader in the OSF HealthCare response to COVID-19.

Upwards of 4% of Americans are living with some type of immunocompromising condition.

Dr. Kasper says it’s important for everyone to be vaccinated against COVID-19, especially if you are immunocompromised. But even that might not be enough for some whose systems fail to make any antibody response.

“We aren’t sure that some people that are on higher dose of immunosuppression are making adequate immune response. While we encourage all to be vaccinated the immunity is seen as a population benefit as much as it is an individual benefit,” he says.

“Everyone should strongly consider vaccination those who are immune compromised even more strongly should consider that. We work on initiatives with our colleagues in hematology and oncology, with our colleagues within gastroenterology other specialties that deal with immunocompromised patients to ensure timely vaccination.”

For those without a fully intact immune system, Dr. Kasper says it’s important to discuss options with your provider, including the need to wear a mask in certain situations.

He adds that even though the clinical trials for the COVID-19 vaccines did not include those with immune-system deficiencies, that doesn’t make them any less effective for high risk patients. If anything, it makes vaccination even more important.

“There is a benefit from the vaccine where the population protects the few. So while not everyone was included in the vaccine (trial), showing that the vaccine is widely effective and is being widely used does give benefit to those who might not be fully protected from it,” says Dr. Kasper.

Even after vaccination, the best course of action for those who are immunocompromised, may be to remain extra cautious: continuing with hand-washing, mask-wearing, social distancing and choosing the types of gatherings that are the safest for them until ways to boost the immune system against COVID-19 can be developed.