

## **Returning to school - updated advice for paediatric rheumatology patients during the COVID-19 pandemic**

As you know we are now in the fortunate position where plans are being made in most areas of Australia to re-open schools.

For some parents of more vulnerable children, including immunosuppressed patients and those with a rheumatic disease, the decision whether to send their children back to school is a source of concern.

- **Our advice is that children with a rheumatic disease who are on immunosuppression can return to school when schools re-open.**
- Parents of children who are on immunosuppressive medications can also return to work in their workplace.

### **This advice is based upon the following facts:**

- Children are less likely than adults to contract coronavirus infection.
- For children who do get coronavirus infection the risk of severe COVID-19 disease is very low
- The evidence suggests that most immunosuppressed children are not at a significantly higher risk of severe COVID-19 disease than their age matched peers.
- The very low rates of community transmission in Australia means the risk of contracting coronavirus infection is currently very low. The ready availability of testing and good contact tracing capability mean that we are well placed to isolate and contain outbreaks as they occur.
- There is good evidence to suggest that children don't spread coronavirus like adults. Child to child transmission is rare. The evidence suggests that it is very unusual for asymptomatic children to spread the disease.
- The low risk of contracting coronavirus is likely to persist for many months or even longer, depending upon if and when a vaccine becomes available. It is not in children's best interests to exclude them from school indefinitely when the evidence suggests that the risk of developing severe COVID-19 is very low.

### **Should my child receive influenza vaccine?**

- We would recommend that your child and immediate family receive the flu vaccine.

### **What about the reports of Kawasaki's disease in children with COVID-19?**

- Recently there have been reports emerging of a possible association between COVID-19 and a condition called Kawasaki's disease in children.
- Kawasaki's disease is a severe inflammatory response.
- Symptoms include fever, skin rash and occasionally inflammation around the heart.
- The association with COVID-19 has not yet been proven and to the best of our knowledge there is no suggestion that immunosuppressed children are at increased risk of developing this condition.
- We will continue to monitor this possible association as more information becomes available.

### **Does my child have to practice social distancing at school?**

- There will be an increased focus on hand-washing and other hygiene measures.
- Social distancing is not practical in the younger age groups and does not appear to be necessary.
- However, older students in the later secondary years are more capable of complying with social distancing recommendations.
- These older students probably do have a slightly higher risk of contracting the virus from other students so it makes sense that every effort should be made to follow recommendations regarding regular hand-washing and social distancing.
- The greatest risk for school outbreaks remains adults.
- Therefore, it is very important that parents comply with restrictions to reduce the contact that they have with other parents, teachers and students in the school environment.

This advice will be updated based on the current situation and will be influenced by government decision making around school closures if an outbreak was to occur.