

# What You Should Know About Drug Treatments for COVID-19



You may have heard about potential drug treatments for COVID-19. But what is really known about these treatments? It can be hard to tell if what you're hearing or reading is trustworthy, just speculation, or misinformation.

When it comes to your health and the health of others, it's important to know what really works for treating this disease.

- Most cases of COVID-19 can be managed at home — follow the advice of your [local public health authority](#).
- Contact your health care provider or local public health information line for advice or if you think you have symptoms of COVID-19 or if they worsen.
- Researchers are studying whether dexamethasone can be used to treat COVID-19.
- Remdesivir is used to treat patients with COVID-19, but only for those who are very sick and in the hospital.
- Don't use unproven COVID-19 drug treatments.
- Unproven COVID-19 drug treatments could harm you.
- If you take unproven COVID-19 drug treatments, people who need those drugs for other illnesses might not be able to get them.

## What drug treatments work for COVID-19?

As of July 27, 2020, in Canada, **remdesivir is the only drug that has been approved for treating COVID-19**, and it's used only in the hospital for very sick patients who can't breathe on their own and who are being closely monitored by hospital staff. **There are no recommended drugs for preventing COVID-19, no natural health products are known to help, and there's currently no COVID-19 vaccine.**

The other potential COVID-19 drugs we've been hearing about — like chloroquine or hydroxychloroquine, dexamethasone, HIV protease inhibitors, and convalescent plasma — may look promising, but we don't yet know if they work.

A treatment shouldn't be used until it's been thoroughly tested to find out if it's helpful and safe. In many cases, treatments that were once thought to be promising have been shown not to work or to cause more harm than good.

## I've heard of people using COVID-19 drugs other than remdesivir. Why are they using them if they don't work?

There are some people taking unproven COVID-19 drug treatments because they're involved in a clinical trial, which is a study to find out if that drug is helpful and safe. Patients may also be given these drugs in the hospital as a last resort if their COVID-19 symptoms are serious or life-threatening and aren't improving. There's currently a clinical trial under way on dexamethasone for treating patients hospitalized with COVID-19 and, although the results seem encouraging so far, it's too early to know if this treatment works.

## What are the potential risks of using an unproven COVID-19 drug treatment?

### You could be putting yourself at risk.

If you use an unproven drug treatment for COVID-19, it could harm you.

Some of the unproven, suggested treatments for COVID-19 are already in use for other illnesses. So, you might think there's no risk in trying these drugs. However, although they're safe to use for these other illnesses, they might be harmful if taken for COVID-19.

Plus, most drugs have side effects. So, before you use a drug to treat any illness, the possible benefits should be known to outweigh the possible harms.

### You could be putting others at risk.

By using an unproven drug treatment for COVID-19, you could be contributing to drug shortages. A drug shortage is when there's less of a drug available than what's needed.

Using drugs for COVID-19 could mean that people who take the same drugs for other illnesses (for which they've been proven to work) might not be able to get them. Instead, we should save these treatments for people who depend on them to stay healthy.

## What should I do if I think I have COVID-19?

If you become ill with COVID-19, you will most likely have a mild case of the disease that will go away on its own. Common symptoms of COVID-19 include a cough that is new or getting worse, trouble breathing or being short of breath, feeling tired or weak, loss of smell or taste, headache, fever, chills, body aches, stomach pain, diarrhea, and vomiting. Often, you can manage your symptoms at home.

You should follow the advice of your local public health authority and:

- stay in your home
- avoid contact with others, including other members of your household
- monitor your symptoms.

If you are concerned about your symptoms, your symptoms worsen, or you need advice, call your health care provider or local public health information line. More severe cases of COVID-19 may need to be treated in a hospital.

## A lot of what I know out about COVID-19 is from the internet. How do I know if the information is trustworthy?

Be skeptical! Information you find on the internet is not always reliable and is sometimes just meant to grab your attention. But there are a few things you can look for that might indicate that a website is not providing trustworthy information.

### Be suspicious when:

- The information is based on only one person's experience or is supported only by personal testimonials.
- The information is presented in a sensational, overly emotional, or alarmist way.
- The claims seem to suggest that the treatment works for everyone (e.g., a 100% success rate).
- The website is also trying to sell you something.

### DISCLAIMER

This material is made available for informational purposes only and no representations or warranties are made with respect to its fitness for any particular purpose; this document should not be used as a substitute for professional medical advice or for the application of professional judgment in any decision-making process. Users may use this document at their own risk. The Canadian Agency for Drugs and Technologies in Health (CADTH) does not guarantee the accuracy, completeness, or currency of the contents of this document. CADTH is not responsible for any errors or omissions, or injury, loss, or damage arising from or relating to the use of this document and is not responsible for any third-party materials contained or referred to herein. Subject to the aforementioned limitations, the views expressed herein do not necessarily reflect the views of Health Canada, Canada's provincial or territorial governments, other CADTH funders, or any third-party supplier of information. This document is subject to copyright and other intellectual property rights and may only be used for non-commercial, personal use or private research and study.

- You can't really tell who wrote the content or what qualifications they have; they might be acting in their own best interests instead of yours.
- Research studies are mentioned, but information that would help you find those studies isn't given, or the studies are old (from 10 years ago or more).
- There are several spelling mistakes and/or typos on the website.
- There are many broken links, which could mean that the information on the website hasn't been kept up-to-date.

Finally, keep in mind that we're learning new things about COVID-19 and how to treat it almost every day. So take note of when the information was posted. What was understood at the time may not be the same as what is known today.

## Where can I find trustworthy information on COVID-19?



### Health Canada

#### The Public Health Agency of Canada

[General information about COVID-19](#)

[COVID-19 Symptom Self-Assessment Tool](#)

[Up-to-date information on the spread of COVID-19 in Canada](#)

#### The Medical Library Association

[COVID-19 Resources for Patients and the Public](#)

#### Choosing Wisely Canada

[COVID-19 Recommendations for the Public and for Clinicians](#)

#### World Health Organization

[Q&A on coronaviruses \(COVID-19\)](#)

Reviewers of this handout included Dawn Richards, an individual who lives with rheumatoid arthritis and a volunteer Vice-President of the Canadian Arthritis Patient Alliance, and staff members of the Pharmaceutical Services Branch of the New Brunswick Department of Health.

### ABOUT CADTH

CADTH is an independent, not-for-profit organization responsible for providing Canada's health care decision-makers with objective evidence to help make informed decisions about the optimal use of drugs and medical devices in our health care system.

CADTH receives funding from Canada's federal, provincial, and territorial governments, with the exception of Quebec.

September 2020