

Access to COVID-19 Treatments for Persons Living with CLL

January 16, 2024

COVID-19 is still very much with us, as much as we wish it was not. As fall turns to winter, the number of people hospitalized with COVID has been steadily increasing.

In the light of this disturbing trend, we have updated this document which was initially published in July 2022.

People with CLL are at greater risk of severe consequences of COVID-19 and less protected by vaccination because CLL reduces the effectiveness of their immune system. In other words, they are immunocompromised.

In the CLL Canada [eBulletin #23](#), we looked at studies that documented the risk of complications as well as vaccine effectiveness in people with CLL. Our recent [eBulletin #29](#) includes articles with COVID updates, with some highlights included in the information below.

In the first part of this document, we will discuss the treatments for COVID-19 that are currently available to patients who could develop severe complications. Since access to treatments is limited, we will also look at how CLL patients can successfully meet the access conditions.

In the second part, a table outlines how to obtain COVID treatments in each province. The table also outlines the way in which each province define "immunocompromised" to include or exclude CLL patients either in watch and wait or in remission, in other words not currently under treatment.

Types of Treatment

Treatments to prevent serious COVID-19

Vaccination is recommended for all people with CLL even though the disease may reduce their effectiveness. After all, some protection is better than none.

Recent studies have show that the more doses of COVID vaccines a CLL patient has received beyond two doses, the more chance that they will seroconvert, that is, they will produce antibodies that will offer protection

from COVID¹. In a recent webinar², Dr. Versha Banerji, CLL doctor and research scientist based in Winnipeg, discussed a study that shows the level of COVID fighting antibodies increases with each successive vaccine dose for people with CLL. This means a significant action those with CLL can take is to make sure we are up-to-date on all COVID-19 vaccinations available to us. A lot of other very relevant prevention and treatment information for CLL patients was shared during this presentation which can be viewed [here](#).

Treatment for persons who have contracted COVID-19

Paxlovid is one antiviral treatment that may be available (if not contraindicated by other medication taken) for immunocompromised people, including CLL patients, who contract COVID to reduce the severity of the illness. It is an oral medication that must be taken within five days of developing symptoms.

Paxlovid has undesirable interactions with several drugs, including CLL treatments such as Ibrutinib, Acalabrutinib and Venetoclax. Should you take these medications, consult with your CLL doctor to determine whether or not you could temporarily lower the dose or stop your CLL treatment for the 5-day duration of Paxlovid treatment.

Note that there appear to be a small number of cases where COVID-19 comes back after treatment with Paxlovid, which is called rebound. A recent article by Dani Blum, a reporter for The New York Times, discusses 'Paxlovid rebound' based on interviews with several doctors.

Paxlovid rebound refers to the return of symptoms or a positive test after the treatment has been completed, typically within a week of recovering from the virus.

Advice for those who experience rebound is to assume that if you test positive again on a rapid test that you are contagious and should take the necessary precautions of isolating and masking. The full summary of this article is contained in the CLL eBulletin #29 and can be seen [here](#).

¹ Multiple COVID-19 vaccine doses in CLL and MBL improve immune responses with progressive and high seroconversion, Shen, Y et al. *Blood* (2022) 140 (25): 2709–2721 <https://doi.org/10.1182/blood.2022017814>

² COVID-19 Update for Lymphoma and CLL Patients, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpRemBFg390>

Remdisivir is a monoclonal antibody which is given intravenously for patients with COVID symptoms for whom Paxlovid is not advised. This must be taken within seven days of developing symptoms.

Access Conditions

With the exception of vaccination, COVID treatments are reserved for people most at risk of developing severe complications from COVID-19, including the immunocompromised. All CLL patients are immunocompromised to some degree, because CLL is a cancer of the B cells that are an important part of the body's immune system.

However, in many provinces only people with cancer who are under active treatment are considered to be immunocompromised, leaving out people with CLL in watch and wait or in remission. The exceptions are people who have undergone stem cell transplants or CAR-T therapy.

CLL Canada, in collaboration with Lymphoma Canada and the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society of Canada, has been advocating to the federal and provincial governments to provide access to COVID-19 treatments for all people with CLL, whether they are in the period before, during or after CLL treatment.

Using the Treatment Access Table

The treatment access table below is intended to inform a person with CLL how to gain access to COVID-19 treatments.

All provinces require:

- A positive COVID-19 test. Most will accept a rapid antigen or home test, but some may require a PCR or laboratory test.
- That the COVID-19 treatment be given within 5 days of the appearance of symptoms for Paxlovid and within 7 days for Remdisivir.
- That patients go through a screening process either online and/or by telephone with a health professional.
- That you meet the criteria for being at risk of severe complications, as defined in each province. For people with CLL that usually means being immunocompromised.

The definition of an immunocompromised person will vary by province. If you are in watch and wait or in remission and live in a province where

being immunocompromised includes only cancer patients currently under treatment, consider the following:

- Do you have another health condition that could make you eligible for treatment? These often include obesity, heart conditions, diabetes and more. Consult your provincial government's website to see the complete list.
- Immunoglobulin infusions, either IVIG at the hospital or at home by subcutaneous infusion, could be accepted as proof that you are immunocompromised.
- Consult your CLL doctor or GP about the possibility of getting pre-assessed for treatment in case you get sick. The doctor may be able to write a prescription for Paxlovid right now that would only be filled if you tested positive for COVID-19.
- People who are unvaccinated or partially vaccinated are given access to treatments in many provinces.

Recommendations for People with CLL

1. Get the maximum number of vaccine doses available in your province.
2. Understand how to access COVID-19 treatments in your province.
3. Determine ahead of time if you are eligible to receive COVID-19 treatments should you contract COVID-19.
4. Consult your CLL doctor, GP, or provincial health authority should you have some doubts about your eligibility for COVID-19 treatments.
5. We have noticed that some health professionals follow access rules to the letter, while others show more flexibility. If at first you do not succeed in obtaining a treatment, explain that you have a blood cancer called CLL that gives you a compromised immune system. If that does not work, you could ask another health professional.
6. Be aware that access conditions can be changed at any time, for better or for worse, so the information in the table below might not be current. We will update as new information becomes available, but it is a challenge to follow changes in 13 different jurisdictions.

COVID-19 Treatment Access for Persons Living with CLL who Contract COVID-19

Note that this table applies only to Paxlovid and Remdisivir

This information was current as of January 16, 2024. Write to us at cllcanad.org@gmail.com should you have new information so we can update the table.

Province	Website and Phone Number	Eligibility: Which CLL Patient are Considered to be Immunocompromised?	The Process to Obtain Treatment Paxlovid and Remdisivir only
BC	<p>https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/covid-19/vaccine/treatments</p> <p>1-888-268-4319 (7:30 a.m. to 8 p.m.)</p>	<p>Immunocompromised include those under "Treatment for cancer, including haematological malignancies".</p> <p>https://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/covid-19/vaccine/treatments#immunocompromised</p> <p>OR</p> <p>Those identified as Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV), per the document below developed by the BC COVID Therapeutics Committee (see CEV group 3 Section, pages 4-5). Immunocompromised in CEV category 3 includes: "Hematological and other cancers not captured in CEV group 1 or 2." The notes for this category indicate: "Examples of cancers here are chronic hematological malignancies under surveillance (e.g., chronic lymphocytic leukemia) or active solid tumours or metastatic cancer not on treatment but undergoing surveillance."</p> <p>Furthermore, the same document indicates on page 1 that patients should have received information identifying them as Clinically</p>	<p>If you have tested positive on a rapid antigen test, have mild to moderate symptoms that began in the last 7 days, and meet the eligibility criteria:</p> <p>Option #1</p> <p>Talk to your family doctor, nurse practitioner or specialist as soon as possible. If you can't get an appointment within 3 days, you should request treatment via Service BC instead.</p> <p>Option #2</p> <p>Request treatment through Service BC, which has 4 steps:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Online self-assessment 2. Confirmation call 3. Clinical assessment 4. Get your treatment

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		<p>Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) and therefore eligible for treatment.</p> <p>http://www.bccdc.ca/Health-Professionals-Site/Documents/COVID-treatment/PracticeTool2_CEVCriteria.pdf</p>	
AB	<p>https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/topics/Page17753.aspx</p> <p>Health Link – Dedicated COVID line 1-844-343-0971</p> <p>(8 a.m. to 10 p.m. seven days a week)</p>	<p>Immunocompromised include those who:</p> <p><i>"-have received a transplant – solid organ or stem cell (Transplant patients should NOT receive Paxlovid™ due to the potential for life-threatening drug interactions but are eligible for other therapies, such as Remdesivir.)</i></p> <p><i>- are "an oncology patient who has received a dose of any IV or oral chemotherapy or other immunosuppressive treatment since December 2020"</i></p> <p>https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/assets/info/ppih/if-ppih-covid-19-paxlovid-faq-patient.pdf</p>	<p><i>"If you have symptoms of COVID-19, have received a positive test result from a rapid/at home test and you are high risk for severe outcomes according to the guidelines above, there are two options:</i></p> <p><i>1.Contact your family physician to book an assessment,</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>OR</i></p> <p><i>2.Call the dedicated line at 1-844-343-0971 and leave a message. A staff member will call you back to ask some initial questions before referring you to a healthcare provider on the Outpatient Treatment Program team."</i></p>
SK	<p>https://www.saskatchewan.ca/government/health-care-administration-and-provider-resources/treatment-procedures-and-guidelines/emerging-public-health-issues/2019-novel-coronavirus/testing-information/covid-19-treatments</p> <p>Healthline 811</p>	<p>Those at higher risk include:</p> <p><i>"People in active treatment for cancer"</i></p> <p>https://www.saskatchewan.ca/government/health-care-administration-and-provider-resources/treatment-procedures-and-guidelines/emerging-public-health-issues/2019-novel-coronavirus/testing-information/covid-19-treatments#factors-that-may-affect-your-eligibility</p>	<p>For Remdisivir</p> <p><i>"If you test positive for COVID-19 on a rapid antigen test or a PCR test and believe you may meet all the criteria for COVID-19 treatment, call HealthLine 811. You will receive additional screening and be referred appropriately."</i></p> <p>For Paxlovid</p> <p><i>If you test positive for COVID-19 on a rapid antigen test or a PCR test and believe you may meet all the criteria for Paxlovid treatment, call</i></p>

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			<p>a participating pharmacist, HealthLine 811 or a nurse practitioner.</p> <p>The page to search for a participating pharmacist is here</p>
MB	<p>https://www.gov.mb.ca/covid19/treatment.html</p> <p>Health Links 204-788-8200 or 1-888-315-9257</p>	<p>At higher risk of severe outcomes includes those who:</p> <p>"Are moderately to severely immunocompromised due to a medical condition or treatment"</p> <p>https://gov.mb.ca/covid19/treatment/index.htm</p>	<p>" If you are 18 or older and meet one of these criteria, talk with your health care provider or call Health Links - Info Santé at 204-788-8200 or 1-888-315-9257 (toll-free) to see if COVID-19 treatment is right for you."</p> <p>"To improve access, one of the treatments (Paxlovid) will be available at 175+ pharmacies across Manitoba with a prescription."</p> <p>See full listing here: https://gov.mb.ca/covid19/treatment/paxlovid-locations.html</p>
ON	<p>https://covid-19.ontario.ca/covid-19-treatments</p> <p>Health Connect Ontario (Health811): Call 811 or go to health811.ontario.ca to access online chat function https://www.ontariohealth.ca/COVID-19/Health-System-Response-Resources#covid19</p>	<p>Those at higher risk of severe COVID include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> "18 years of age or older and are immunocompromised" <p>https://www.ontario.ca/page/covid-19-testing-and-treatment#section-5</p> <p>=A document by the Science Table provides more detail on the definition of immunocompromised:</p> <p>"Examples of immunocompromised or immunosuppressed individuals include receipt of treatment for solid tumors and hematologic malignancies (including individuals with lymphoid malignancies who are being monitored without active treatment), and</p>	<p>"If you have <u>symptoms</u> (even if mild) and are at higher risk of severe COVID-19, seek testing and care immediately by either:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> contacting a primary care provider (for example, a family doctor, nurse practitioner or your treating specialist) contacting your local pharmacy to find out if there is a pharmacist available that can prescribe Paxlovid visiting a <u>clinical assessment centre</u> (available in select areas only)" <p>"If you do not have symptoms but are at higher risk of severe COVID-19, make a plan in case you get sick. Talk to your primary care</p>

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		<p>receipt of chimeric antigen receptor (CAR)-T-cell or hematopoietic stem cell transplant (within 2 years of transplantation or taking immunosuppression therapy)”</p> <p>https://covid19-sciencetable.ca/sciencebrief/evidence-based-recommendations-on-the-use-of-nirmatrelvir-ritonavir-paxlovid-for-adults-in-ontario/</p> <p>To find this text on the website above, open the “Full Text” section, do a search for “immunocompromised” until you reach the section entitled “Further Definitions”. The text above is in the first sentence.</p> <p>See also https://covid19-sciencetable.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Clinical-Practice-Guidelines_Update_20220401_page2-scaled.jpg</p>	<p>provider or pharmacist in advance to determine your treatment options.”</p> <p>Treatment Screener, “... can use this screener even if you do not have symptoms, to be prepared in case you get sick”.</p> <p>https://covid-19.ontario.ca/covid-treatment-screener/</p>
<p>QC</p>	<p>English</p> <p>https://www.quebec.ca/en/health/health-issues/a-z/2019-coronavirus/symptoms-transmission-treatment/oral-treatment-against-covid-19-paxlovidmc</p> <p>Français</p> <p>https://www.quebec.ca/sante/problemes-de-sante/a-z/coronavirus-2019/symptomes-</p>	<p>Those at higher risk include:</p> <p>“adults who are moderately to severely immunocompromised owing to an underlying condition or the treatment they are receiving for this condition (regardless of their vaccination status)”</p> <p>Immunocompromised is defined as “Active treatment of a solid tumor or hematological cancer deemed immunosuppressive by the treating physician”</p> <p>https://www.quebec.ca/en/health/health-issues/a-z/2019-coronavirus/symptoms-transmission-treatment/oral-treatment-against-covid-19-paxlovidmc#c135074</p>	<p>With positive test result, “A <i>pharmacist, specialized nurse practitioner or physician will determine eligibility to receive Paxlovid, taking into account the recommendations issued by INESSS. If eligible, they will be able to receive Paxlovid treatment free of charge at the pharmacy of their choice.</i>”</p> <p>Français</p> <p>Si le résultat d’un test de dépistage est positif, « <i>Le pharmacien, l’infirmier praticien spécialisé ou le médecin déterminera si la personne est admissible à recevoir le Paxlovid, en tenant</i></p>

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	<p>transmission-traitement/traitement-oral-contre-covid-19-paxlovidmc</p>	<p>https://cdn-contenu.quebec.ca/cdn-contenu/sante/documents/Problemes_de_sante/covid-19/22-210-10WA_feuillet-paxlovid.pdf</p> <p>Français</p> <p>« être un adulte avec une immunosuppression modérée à sévère causée par une condition sous-jacente ou le traitement de celle-ci (peu importe le statut vaccinal) »</p> <p>https://www.quebec.ca/sante/problemes-de-sante/a-z/coronavirus-2019/symptomes-transmission-traitement/traitement-oral-contre-covid-19-paxlovidmc</p> <p>https://cdn-contenu.quebec.ca/cdn-contenu/sante/documents/Problemes_de_sante/covid-19/23-210-06WF_feuillet-paxlovid.pdf</p> <p>Immunosuppression sévère : « Traitement actif d'une tumeur solide ou d'un cancer hématologique jugé immunosuppresseur par le médecin traitant»</p> <p>https://www.inesss.qc.ca/covid-19/presentations-cliniques/personnes-immunosupprimees.html (French only)</p> <p>https://www.inesss.qc.ca/fileadmin/doc/INESSS/COVID-19/Algorithme_traitement_COVID_ambulatoire_VF.pdf</p>	<p><i>compte des recommandations de l'INESSS. Si elle est admissible, elle pourra recevoir gratuitement son traitement de Paxlovid dans la pharmacie de son choix ».</i></p>

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NB	<p>https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/corporate/promo/covid-19/treatments.html</p> <p>Contact your Primary Care Provider, call 811 or visit https://www.evisitnb.ca/</p>	<p>You may be considered at higher risk of severe outcomes if you:</p> <p><i>"are moderately to severely immunocompromised due to a medical condition or treatment have one or more chronic medical conditions"</i></p> <p>https://www2.gnb.ca/content/gnb/en/corporate/promo/covid-19/treatments.html#2</p>	<p><i>"Contact your Primary Care Provider. Inform your provider that you have tested positive for COVID-19 and you would like to be assessed for Paxlovid. If you do not have or cannot reach your primary care provider, please contact a participating pharmacy to be assessed. The list of participating pharmacies can be found here. If you cannot access a provider or pharmacy to be assessed, then call 811 or visit https://www.evisitnb.ca/. You will be assessed and, if appropriate, will be given an appointment with a nurse practitioner or doctor. To access Paxlovid, individuals must have a confirmed positive test, either PCR or Point of Care Test (POCT) and start Paxlovid within 5 days of symptom onset."</i></p>
NS	<p>https://policy.nshealth.ca/Site_Published/covid19/document_render.aspx?documentRender.IdType=6&documentRender.GenericField=&documentRender.Id=95135</p> <p>Call: 811 or 1-833-797-7772</p>	<p>Those at high risk include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - active cancer - moderately to severely immunocompromised" <p>Immunocompromised :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - solid tumour or hematologic malignancies or treatments for these conditions - hematopoietic stem cell transplant (within 2 years of transplantation or taking immunosuppression therapy) 	<p><i>"Nova Scotia Health uses the Report and Support Form to identify Nova Scotians at high risk of developing severe disease who may benefit from quick access to COVID-19 medications, nirmatrelvir/ritonavir (Paxlovid) and remdesivir (Veklury), that require a designated prescriber.</i></p> <p><i>The form is filled out online at https://c19hc.nshealth.ca/self-report or by calling 1-833-797-7772. Patients that do not meet all criteria ... may also be considered on a</i></p>

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		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>due to chimeric antigen receptor (CAR) T cell therapy targeting lymphocytes</i> - <i>recent (within last 12 months) treatment with...immunosuppressive therapies including anti- B-cell therapies” (see second link below for full listing)</i> <p>https://novascotia.ca/dhw/cdpc/documents/third-doses-Covid-19-vaccine-immunocompromise.pdf</p> <p>https://novascotia.ca/dhw/cdpc/documents/immunosuppressive-medication-list.pdf</p>	<p>case-by-case basis by emailing COVIDTreatment@nshealth.ca.”</p> <p>https://c19hc.nshealth.ca/self-report/</p>
PE	<p>https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/information/health-and-wellness/caring-for-yourself-or-others-with-covid-19</p> <p>Call 811</p>	<p>Underlying medical conditions:</p> <p><i>“cancers of the blood or bone marrow such as leukemia, lymphoma or myeloma who are at any stage of treatment”</i></p> <p>For more details:</p> <p>https://www.princeedwardisland.ca/en/information/underlying-medical-conditions</p>	<p><i>“reach out to your family physician/nurse practitioner or 811 to discuss your eligibility. If you do not have a family doctor or nurse practitioner, call the 811 telehealth service for advice or visit a walk-in clinic. Inform your initial contact, whether via telephone or in person, that you are in self isolation.”</i></p>
NF	<p>https://www.gov.nl.ca/covid-19/public-health-guidance/covid-19/treatments/</p>	<p><i>“Immunocompromised means:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>You are undergoing cancer treatment;</i> • <i>You had a stem cell transplant in the last 2 years;</i> • <i>You had CAR-T cell treatment in the last 2 years”</i> 	<p><i>“If you think you may be eligible for treatment with Paxlovid, contact your primary care provider (family physician or nurse practitioner) or your pharmacist to discuss if Paxlovid is an appropriate treatment for you.”</i></p>

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YT	https://yukon.ca/en/health-and-wellness/covid-19-information/your-health-covid-19/find-information-about-covid-19	<p>Patients <i>"who meet a set of specific risk factors as determined by their health care provider"</i></p>	<p><i>"Talk to your health care provider about whether or not this treatment option is right for you."</i></p>
NT	<p> https://www.hss.gov.nt.ca/en/services/covid-19 https://www.nthssa.ca/en/services/covid-19-updates Phone: 811 </p>	<p><i>Treatments that reduce severe outcomes are available for those at high risk.</i></p> <p>Including:</p> <p><i>"Moderately or severely immunocompromised"</i></p> <p><i>"Undergoing cancer treatment"</i></p> <p><i>"The current NTHSSA guidance for who can access Paxlovid includes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>• Severely immunocompromised patients, regardless of age or immunization status"</i> <p>Immunocompromised includes:</p> <p><i>"-You are undergoing current chemotherapy or radiation therapy for cancer;</i></p> <p><i>- You have had treatment for leukemia with a stem cell transplant or T-cell therapy in the last two years</i></p> <p><i>- You have a specific diagnosis of a severe B-cell or T-cell deficiency</i></p> <p><i>- ... you are receiving injectable or intravenous immune suppressing therapy which includes ... rituximab (Rituxan)..."</i></p>	<p><i>"If you have any of the above higher-risk conditions and have symptoms of COVID-19, you are at greater risk for severe outcomes.</i></p> <p><u><i>Treatments that reduce severe outcomes are available for those at higher risk. To be considered for treatment, an assessment by a healthcare provider is needed. You can also call 8-1-1 for non urgent medical advice."</i></u></p> <p>https://www.nthssa.ca/en/covid-testing</p>

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		<p>https://www.nthssa.ca/en/newsroom/public-notice-third-dose-vaccinations-specified-frontline-workers-and-immunocompromised</p> <p><i>"If you believe you have moderate to severe immune compromise and your situation is not represented in this list, talk your healthcare provider about whether your condition makes you eligible for a 3rd or 4th dose of the COVID-19 vaccine."</i></p> <p>https://www.nthssa.ca/en/services/coronavirus-disease-covid-19-updates/covid-vaccine</p>	
NU	<p>COVID Information: Contact a public health unit or local health care centre.</p>	<p>"Severe disease occurs more often in those who are unvaccinated, with increasing age (>55 years), who are immunocompromised and/or have underlying medical conditions"</p> <p>"Underlying medical conditions associated with more severe COVID-19 disease:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cancer - Immunocompromised state" <p>"Severely immune compromised:</p> <p>Individuals with one or more of the following (in consultation with the most appropriate care provider if needed):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bone marrow transplant • Chronic lymphocytic leukemia • Chimeric antigen receptor T-cell therapy 	<p>"Guidelines have been developed for the use of treatments in Nunavut and have been shared with health centres."</p> <p>"Any individual who suspects they may have COVID-19 or has tested positive on a Rapid Antigen Test (RAT) may be assessed for potential treatment on first point of contact with a healthcare provider."</p>

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		<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use of rituximab” <p>https://www.gov.nu.ca/sites/default/files/documents/2023-10/final_covid19_protocol_v10_wappendices_october_2023.pdf</p> <p><i>Note: See clinical presentation and treatment sections, and Appendices A and B in this document</i></p>	