

COVID-19 Community Treatments Northern Ireland (NI) - Frequently Asked Questions

Last updated 5th December 2022

1. What COVID-19 treatments are available in the community?

The Health and Social Care (HSC) Service is offering antiviral and antibody treatments to people with COVID-19, in the community, who are at highest risk of becoming seriously ill. Treatments are provided by a HSC Trust Outpatient COVID-19 Treatment service (OCTs).

The types of COVID-19 treatment available are:

- antivirals: [Paxlovid](#) (may be known as nirmatrelvir plus ritonavir), Remdesivir ([Veklury](#)) or Molnupiravir ([Lagevrio](#))
- neutralising monoclonal antibody (nMAB): [Sotrovimab](#) a biological medicine

These treatments can help some people manage their COVID-19 symptoms and reduce the risk of becoming seriously ill.

2. Who can access these new COVID-19 treatments?

The treatments available are for people who have symptoms **and** have tested positive, [using a lateral flow test \(or a PCR test if this has been required\)](#) for COVID-19 **and** are at highest risk of getting seriously ill.

This includes some people who have:

- Down's syndrome, or another chromosomal disorder that affects your immune system
- certain types of cancer or have received treatment for certain types of cancer
- sickle cell disease
- certain conditions affecting your blood
- chronic kidney disease (CKD) stage 4 or 5
- severe liver disease
- had an organ transplant
- certain autoimmune or inflammatory conditions
- HIV or AIDS and have a weakened immune system
- a condition affecting your immune system
- a rare condition affecting the brain or nerves (multiple sclerosis, motor neurone disease, Huntington's disease or myasthenia gravis)

A doctor or specialist will confirm if you are eligible for treatment.

A full list of conditions is available at:

- [Interim Clinical Commissioning Policy](#)

Further information on who can access these treatments and how they can be accessed is available at [NI Direct Treatments for coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#).

3. How were the criteria for the highest risk group determined?

The groups of highest risk patients eligible for treatment at local HSC trusts have been determined by an independent expert group commissioned by the Department of Health and Social Care in England and included in a clinical policy agreed by all four Chief Medical Officers in the UK. This policy was developed based on evidence that certain health conditions can make a patient much more likely to progress to a severe COVID-19 illness.

The Independent advisory group report is available here: [Highest-risk patients eligible for COVID-19 treatments: independent advisory group report](#)

A summary of the health conditions at highest risk from COVID-19 infection and therefore eligible for direct treatment by a health Trust, is provided at [NI Direct Treatments for coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#) with a full list of the conditions available at [Interim Clinical Commissioning Policy](#).

The Department of Health and Social Care formed a Therapeutics Clinical Review Panel (TCRP) in April 2022. The panel is made up of senior clinicians from all four nations and will provide advice to the four UK Chief Medical Officers.

The TRCP will determine which at-risk patient cohorts could be eligible for COVID-19 therapies. The panel will provide advice on the definition and revision of eligible cohorts for new COVID-19 therapeutics. This will include a process to provide advice on questions from patient and clinician stakeholders, through a nominated clinician representing a group or individual.

Further information on the role of the TCRP and how patients can submit a question on eligible cohorts for COVID-19 treatments is available at [COVID-19 Therapeutics Clinical Review Panel](#).

4. How do I know if I am eligible to receive COVID-19 treatments at HSC trust Outpatient COVID-19 treatment units?

A summary of the health conditions that make patients at highest risk from COVID-19 illness and who therefore may be eligible for treatment, is available at [NI Direct Treatments for coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#), with more detailed information provided in the UK [Interim Clinical Commissioning Policy](#)

In NI there is a digital system to identify patients. If you have a positive lateral flow test result and you have [reported the result](#) you will receive a message about your positive test result.

If there is information in the HSC central record systems showing that you may have a condition or be taking a medicine that might make you eligible for a COVID-19 treatment, you may receive a further text message, advising that your local HSC Trust will be told and that medical staff will review information in your medical records.

If you test positive for COVID-19 and you do not receive a text message and/or telephone call from your local trust about treatment but feel you may be eligible, you can contact your GP practice to discuss this. Your GP practice can contact the trust on your behalf.

GPs and Out of Hours GPs have received written information on the service and can provide further advice on eligibility for treatment. In addition, GPs and Out of Hours GPs can refer eligible patients directly for treatment at their local HSC trust.

It is important that you carefully review the [information on eligibility](#) before making contact with your GP practice.

5. How do I get a COVID-19 treatment?

It is strongly recommended that everyone who is in a group that may be eligible for a COVID-19 treatment should obtain rapid lateral flow tests to keep at home in case you become symptomatic. Lateral flow tests are available from most community pharmacies in Northern Ireland or you can order the tests [online](#) for free delivery to your home. If you cannot use the online or pharmacy collect service, call 119 to order a rapid lateral flow test (free from mobiles and landlines).

If you are in a group who may be eligible for treatment you should stay alert to the symptoms of COVID-19 and if you develop any [symptoms of COVID-19](#) you should test as soon as possible with a lateral flow test, even if your symptoms are mild.

You need to [report your result](#) and include a mobile phone number.

If your first lateral flow test is negative, but you still have symptoms, you should take another lateral flow test on each of the next two days (three tests in total over three days). If all three lateral flow test results are negative and you have COVID-19 symptoms, you should contact your GP.

If any of your lateral flow tests are positive and you have reported the result you will receive a message about your positive test result.

If there is information in the HSC central record systems showing that you may have a condition or be taking a medicine that might make you eligible for a COVID-19 treatment, you may receive a further text message, advising that your local HSC Trust will be told and that medical staff will review information in your medical records.

If you test positive for COVID-19 and you do not receive a text message about treatment but feel you may be eligible, you can contact your GP practice to discuss this. Your GP practice can contact the trust on your behalf.

If your local HSC Trust identifies you as suitable for treatment, they will be in contact to discuss this further. This call may be from an unknown or withheld number.

If you have received a text message about treatment, but do not receive a follow up telephone call from your local trust within a couple of days and feel you may be eligible, you can contact your GP practice to discuss this. Your GP practice can contact the trust on your behalf.

It is important that you carefully review the information on eligibility before contacting your GP practice.

Detailed guidance about patient groups at highest risk of COVID-19 and therefore eligible for COVID-19 treatments, can be found in the [Interim Clinical Commissioning Policy](#).

If you have not tested positive for COVID-19 using a PCR or lateral flow test, you are not eligible for these treatments.

6. Who decides what type of treatment I get if I'm eligible?

Your local HSC Trust will advise which treatment, if any, is suitable for you once you have been reviewed by a doctor.

Treatment will be on the advice of a clinician and will be either:

- Antiviral [Paxlovid](#) (may be known as nirmatrelvir plus ritonavir)
- Antiviral [Remdesivir \(Veklury\)](#)
- Antiviral [molnupiravir \(Lagevrio\)](#)
- nMAB treatment [Sotrovimab](#)

7. What happens after a HSC trust clinician confirms I need treatment?

If you are given the antiviral treatment Paxlovid or molnupiravir, it comes as either tablets or capsules you swallow. These can be taken at home and your local HSC Trust will advise how this medication will be made available to you.

The nMAB treatment Sotrovimab, or the antiviral treatment remdesivir are given to you through a drip in your arm (infusion) and will be given at a hospital site. Once you have been reviewed by a doctor, you will receive instructions on where and a suitable time to get the treatment as well as advice on how to safely get to the hospital as you are COVID-19 positive.

8. Where is my local treatment centre?

Your local trust will give you instructions on where the treatment will be given to you.

There are 6 established OCTs across the 5 Health and Social Care (HSC) trusts in NI:

- Mater Hospital, Belfast Health and Social Care Trust
- Antrim Area Hospital, Northern Health and Social Care Trust
- Craigavon Area Hospital, Southern Health and Social Care Trust
- Ulster Hospital, South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust
- Altnagelvin Area Hospital, Western Health and Social Care Trust
- South West Acute Hospital, Western Health and Social Care Trust

9. What is a HSC Trust OCTs?

In Northern Ireland, from the 16th December 2021 patients in the highest risk cohort have been able to receive monoclonal antibody and antiviral treatments through the newly established HSC Trust OCTs.

These units help to assess patients who might be eligible for neutralising monoclonal antibodies or antivirals, in line with the UK interim clinical policy. If you are in an eligible group and receive a positive PCR test result or report a positive lateral flow test result, an OCTs clinician will assess you over the phone and advise which treatment, if any, is suitable for you.

10. What should I do if I think I'm eligible for treatments and have tested positive for COVID-19, but I have not been contacted by the health service?

If you test positive for COVID-19 and you do not receive a text message about treatment but feel you are eligible, you can contact your GP practice to discuss this. Your GP practice can contact the trust on your behalf.

If you have received a text message about treatment, but do not receive a follow up telephone call from your local trust within a couple of days and feel you are eligible, you can contact your GP practice to discuss this. Your GP practice can contact the trust on your behalf.

The GPs and Out of Hours GP have received written information on the COVID-19 Treatment service and can provide advice regarding eligibility for treatment. GPs can refer eligible patients directly for treatment at their local HSC trust.

It is important that you carefully review the information on eligibility before making contact with your GP practice.

Detailed guidance about patient groups at highest risk of COVID-19 and therefore eligible for COVID-19 treatments, can be found in the [Interim Clinical Commissioning Policy](#).

11. What should I do if I think I'm eligible for treatments, have tested positive for COVID, have received a message from the trust but have not received a follow up telephone call from the trust?

If you have received a text message about treatment, but do not receive a follow up telephone call from your local trust within a couple of days and feel you are eligible, you can contact your GP practice or if outside opening hours, the Out of Hours GP to discuss this. Your GP can contact the trust on your behalf.

The GPs and Out of Hours GP have received written information on the COVID-19 Treatment service and can provide advice regarding eligibility for treatment. GPs can refer eligible patients directly for treatment at their local HSC trust.

It is important that you carefully review the information on eligibility before making contact with your GP practice.

12. How are you making sure that this highest risk group can access treatments within the short timeframes for effectiveness?

HSC Trust OCTs provide triage to patients on a minimum of six days per week to provide clinical assessment and access treatment for patients within the recommended treatment window.

13. Can I buy these treatments privately instead?

No, HSC treatments for COVID-19 are not available privately, they are free of charge and you will never be asked for your bank account or card details, or asked to pay for treatment.

14. Why is NI not sending pre-notification letters to patients?

In NI we have a digital method to identify patients. When a patient receives a positive PCR result or reports a positive lateral flow test result this is matched with the central record systems. If there is information in the HSC central record systems showing that you may have a condition or be taking a medicine that might make you eligible for a COVID-19 treatment, you may receive a further text message, advising that your local HSC Trust will be advised of your result and that medical staff will review information in your medical records.

If you test positive for COVID-19 and you do not receive a text message about treatment but feel you may be eligible, you can contact your GP practice to discuss this. Your GP practice can contact the trust on your behalf.

If your local HSC Trust identifies you as suitable for treatment, they will be in contact to discuss this further. This call may be from an unknown or withheld number.

If you have received a text message about treatment, but do not receive a follow up telephone call from your local trust within a couple of days and feel you may be eligible, you can contact your GP practice to discuss this. Your GP practice can contact the trust on your behalf.

Information is available on [NI Direct Treatments for coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#) advising any patient who thinks they are eligible and have not received a text message and/or phone call from the trust, to contact their GP. GPs and community pharmacists have all received written information on this service, as well as the PANORAMIC study.

In addition, communications have been issued to highlight the COVID treatments available by way of Department of Health press releases, patient group stakeholder engagement and communications via Department of Health, Health and Social Care Board (from the 1st April 2022 is now known as the Strategic Planning and Policy Group (SPPG)), and HSC Trusts to clinicians and patients, including social media posts.

15. Can I access COVID-19 treatments if eligible and travelling within the United Kingdom and Ireland?

Outpatient COVID-19 Treatment service (OCTs) clinicians have a mechanism to provide direct referral to an equivalent service in England, Scotland and Wales to ensure timely access to COVID-19 treatments for eligible patients who may test positive whilst travelling throughout the UK.

If you are travelling to or from the Republic of Ireland, you can access treatment by contacting the nearest GP who can prescribe treatment for you in an equivalent manner to that available for their own patients.

PANORAMIC study

16. It doesn't look like I am in the highest risk patient group. Is there another way I can access COVID treatments?

From December 2021, antiviral medicines have also been investigated in a national study called PANORAMIC, which is run by the University of Oxford. The PANORAMIC study was open to a wider group of individuals.

Who is eligible to join PANORAMIC:

- You are currently experiencing COVID-19 symptoms beginning in the last 5 days.
- AND: You have had a positive PCR or Lateral Flow test for COVID-19
- AND: You are aged 50 or over, or aged 18 or over with a [LISTED pre-existing condition](#).

The study is investigating in which people new antiviral treatments for COVID-19 in the community reduce the need for hospital admission and get better sooner.

17. Who is running the national study?

The national study is coordinated by the University of Oxford Primary Care Clinical Trials Unit and supported by a range of partners across the UK.

18. Is the PANORAMIC study still open for recruitment?

The PANORAMIC study has recruited over 26,000 participants since opening on 8 December 2021, with over 1000 participants from Northern Ireland. Recruitment for the antiviral Molnupiravir arm of the study closed on 27 April.

An additional antiviral, Paxlovid, is now being investigated in the study

Recruitment to the Paxlovid arm initially began in England only and now has sites open across the UK, including Northern Ireland.

Since 23 November 2022, members of the public in Northern Ireland can register for the Paxlovid arm of the study.

For more information on who can access the study, or if you wish to sign up to take part, visit the [PANORAMIC trial website](#).

If you are in an eligible group and wish to take part in the study you can collect lateral flow tests from participating pharmacies.

You should not collect tests from a pharmacy if you have symptoms. You should ask someone who does not have symptoms to collect the lateral flow tests on your behalf.

19. Will molnupiravir be deployed more widely following the PANORAMIC results?

This cannot be answered at this stage. Decisions on the deployment of molnupiravir will be guided by the data from PANORAMIC (as well as other completed studies) and will be subject to the same clinical and cost-effectiveness assessments as any other medicine. Results from the PANORAMIC study of molnupiravir are expected to be published in Autumn/Winter 2022.

20. Are you only running a national study because you haven't bought enough patient courses for community rollout?

The approach has always been to make sure treatments are prioritised for those who need them the most. The purpose of a national study is to gather additional data in the UK context to ensure we are using these antivirals in the most effective way.

21. Why should I take part in the study if I'm not guaranteed to get the antiviral?

The random allocation of patients to either receive the treatment or not, in addition to standard care is a normal way of running a study. A comparison is needed so that the study team can clearly see any difference between those who received the treatment compared to those who did not.

Participation in studies is crucial in helping rapidly generate data on how these new antivirals work in a vaccinated population. When the study results are available, the health service will be able to put in place a suitable policy so that those who would benefit most from COVID-19 antivirals can access them through normal routes.

22. How can I access this information in another language or alternative format?

The NI Direct website can be translated into other languages using free translation tools, such as Google Translate and Microsoft Translate.

Advice on how to do this is available at the following [NI Direct link](#)

HTML (web pages) is an accessible format that can be used by screen readers and printed etc.

Further information

Patient information on COVID-19 Treatments

- [NI Direct Treatments for coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)

Treatment information (including patient information leaflets)

- Antivirals: [Paxlovid](#) (may be known as nirmatrelvir plus ritonavir), Remdesivir ([Veklury](#)) or Molnupiravir ([Lagevrio](#))
- neutralising monoclonal antibodies (nMAB): [Sotrovimab](#) a biological medicine

UK Clinical Policy

- [Interim Clinical Commissioning Policy and Clinical Guide: Antivirals or neutralising monoclonal antibodies for non-hospitalised patients with COVID-19](#)

PANORAMIC study

- [PANORAMIC website](#)