

COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Patient Update #14

22 November 2021

Dear Valued Repromed Patient,

For many of us 2021 has been a trying year due to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions. Needless to say, the restrictions on interstate and overseas travel to visit family, friends or simply to go on holiday has been emotionally taxing, resulting in many of us looking to 2022 with some trepidation. On November 23rd South Australia will open its borders to all states and territories as we approach the 80 per cent double vaccination target and I realise that many of you may have concerns about what impact a COVID-19 outbreak in our state may have on your future treatment.

I would like to therefore take this opportunity to outline what the likely plans for treatment will be once COVID-19 enters our state in significant numbers. Please note that until SA Health provide a comprehensive update on the road map to South Australia's COVID-19 Ready Plan, it is very difficult for Repromed to make definitive plans. As such our plans are likely to change in the future however, I still thought it prudent to inform you now of what changes we expect to implement at Repromed given the information we have at hand.

1. Should you be vaccinated before starting treatment?

Yes. As Repromed has consistently stated, it is imperative that you are vaccinated to protect both your own health and that of others. Furthermore, as pregnant women are particularly vulnerable to complications from COVID-19, it is extremely important if you are considering becoming pregnant to get vaccinated. Antibodies generated from vaccination will cross the placenta, providing your baby with some protection from the virus.

Recent social media posts have suggested COVID-19 vaccinations can negatively impact on egg and sperm quality and even cause infertility or miscarriage. These reports are factually incorrect. COVID-19 vaccines have now been given to tens of thousands of pregnant women and has been proven to be safe for both mother and baby with no increased risk of miscarriage. Conversely, contracting COVID-19 often produces a high fever and inflammatory reaction, both known to harm fertility in women and men.

2. Do you need to be fully vaccinated to have treatment at Repromed?

No. Repromed will continue to treat unvaccinated patients while it is legally possible to do so. SA Health do not require patients undergoing non-emergency medical care (of which fertility treatment is classified as) in hospitals and day surgeries to be vaccinated, however it is possible that such a directive could be made in the future. As such, we encourage all patients to become vaccinated to ensure their access to fertility treatment is not disrupted in 2022.

3. Do you have to provide evidence of being vaccinated against COVID-19 to Repromed?

No. Currently you are not legally compelled to provide evidence of your vaccination. However, in the interests of patient and staff safety, we will be asking for proof of your vaccination status. If you decline to provide this information – which you are entitled to do, we will manage your care as if you are unvaccinated.

4. Why are you being asked to provide proof of your vaccination?

Vaccination not only reduces your likelihood of contracting COVID-19 and becoming severely unwell, but it also significantly reduces your chance of passing on the virus to other patients and Repromed staff. Given that Repromed has a duty of care to both our patients and staff, there will be added precautions, testing and restriction on clinic visits for unvaccinated patients undergoing treatment with us.

5. How will you provide proof of your vaccination status?

We are still awaiting advice from SA Health on how this will be managed.

6. What steps have been put in place to minimise risk of COVID-19 transmission within Repromed?

Repromed already has significant experience in minimising the risk of virus transmission from earlier outbreaks which occurred during 2021 within the state. These same steps, plus additional enhanced protections will be taken and include:

- Temperature and symptom screening before entry to a Repromed clinic.
- Regular cleaning of surfaces at Repromed clinics.
- Staff and patients wearing masks and socially distancing within the clinics.
- Enhanced HEPA air filtration devices have been installed in all ultrasound rooms, theatre and recovery areas. These filters “scrub” the air reducing virus numbers and the risk of transmission.
- All IVF patients will be required to undergo a COVID-19 PCR test on Day 8 of their treatment cycle (i.e. the day before their first ultrasound). Patients with a positive COVID-19 result will have their IVF cycle cancelled to minimise risk of transmitting the virus to others. While we understand this delay in treatment may cause stress, it is an unavoidable restriction necessary to minimise the risk of other patients and staff contracting COVID-19.
- Patients attending theatre for non-IVF procedures (e.g. hysteroscopy, surgical management of miscarriage, testicular biopsy) will need to have a COVID-19 test 2 days before presenting to theatre and have a negative result.
- Unvaccinated patients will be placed at the end of the theatre list, as is standard practice with any patient who has an infectious disease.
- Patients attending Repromed for procedures that are anticipated to take more than 15 minutes (e.g. surgical sperm extraction, Lipiodol flush, follicular ultrasound scans) will need to have a COVID-19 PCR swab 2 days before their procedure, with a negative result available on the day of the procedure.
- Patients attending for a tracking ultrasound or blood tests are not required to have a COVID-19 test before attending Repromed, unless they are feeling unwell.
- Unvaccinated male patients will have additional restrictions and testing required during treatment. Firstly, on the day of egg retrieval or IUI you will be required to remain in your car until advised to enter the clinic to produce your sperm sample. Secondly, Repromed staff will escort your partner to the carpark after their procedure, rather than the usual practice of being able to collect them from our recovery area within theatre. Finally, unvaccinated men will not be able to attend IUI or embryo transfer procedures unless a negative COVID-19 test is received within 24 hours of the procedure date.
- Where possible, we will try to minimise the number and/or duration of patient visits to our clinics. This may include an increased use of phone consultations for doctor and nurse instructional sessions (where appropriate), embryo quality discussions will be provided by our scientists over the phone on the morning of transfer rather than at the time of transfer, and possible limitations on non-urgent diagnostic tests like diagnostic semen analysis.

7. If you do contract COVID-19, will it impact your treatment?

Unfortunately, yes. Repromed is not in a position to provide treatment for patients with active COVID-19 as we have neither the facilities nor equipment to safely manage your care.

If you develop COVID-19 during treatment we will cancel your cycle and delay treatment until you have fully recovered. This is good medical practice as it is unwise to try for a pregnancy if you have an active infection. It is also unreasonable to risk virus transmission to other patients. If we are required to cancel your treatment due to a COVID-19 infection, you will not be financially disadvantaged when you recommence treatment with us.

8. If you have a minor sniffle or other COVID-19 symptoms during treatment – what should you do?

As per SA Health guidelines, you are required to self-isolate until you can attend a COVID-19 testing centre. Do not come into a Repromed clinic until you have received a negative test result and contact our staff by phone, so we are aware of your situation.

If you develop minor symptoms (e.g. mild sore throat, sniffle) on the day of your egg retrieval it is vitally you report these symptoms to us to protect other patients on the theatre list. If SA Health removes the current legal restrictions on rapid antigen testing, Repromed may consider rapid antigen testing for patients and allow them to undergo their egg retrieval upon a negative result. We have written to SA Health requesting COVID-19 rapid antigen testing to be made legal in South Australia for critical procedures such as egg retrievals, despite several attempts we are still awaiting an answer. Rapid antigen testing is routine in the Eastern states and around the world, so we hope this restriction is lifted quickly.

9. Will Repromed continue with “face to face” consultations?

At the height of last year's COVID-19 lock-down, Repromed suspended face to face consultations as a means of reducing foot-traffic through our clinics and thereby viral transmission risk. It is likely that we will again move to predominantly phone consultations as appropriate however, we recognise patients and staff alike prefer to meet in person. As such, provided you and your partner (if applicable) are vaccinated you may attend your first appointment with your Repromed doctor in person, as long as neither of you have symptoms of COVID-19 or recent contact with a COVID-19 case.

If you or your partner (if applicable) are not vaccinated, face to face consultation will be on a case by case basis and following a negative COVID-19 swab 24 hours before the appointment date.

10. Can you bring your child/ren into Repromed?

All of us at Repromed love children and helping you expand your family, however unfortunately we cannot have children attend Repromed under any circumstances. This is because children under 12 years are currently unable to be vaccinated and their presence at Repromed is not a critical part of your fertility treatment. We know this is not a popular decision when we had to implement it in the past however we ask for your continued understanding regarding this decision. Please be aware that we will need to defer your appointment if you cannot find appropriate babysitting as there can be no exemption to this policy.

11. What will happen if there is a case of COVID-19 at Repromed?

Unlike during the earlier elimination phase of COVID-19, SA Health have stated that in the event of an exposure, businesses will not be required to shut down for a few days and undergo a 'deep clean'. As a worst-case scenario, if one of our clinics is deemed to be an exposure site, we may need to close early for an overnight clean however we should return to normal activity the following day.

12. When will these new Covid-19 actions commence?

South Australia is expected to open its borders to the rest of Australia on the 23rd of November 2021, but it is unlikely that community transmission will occur immediately. As such, we do not anticipate implementing these risk mitigation strategies until after there is evidence of significant community transmission of COVID-19 within South Australia.

13. How long will these restrictions last?

It is impossible for us to know how long these restrictions may apply, but it is likely to be for several months at minimum. Please be reassured that as soon as it is safe to remove these restrictions Repromed will do so.

I suspect that the transition from essentially a COVID-19 free environment to living with the virus present within our community will initially be a difficult and stressful time. SA Health and Repromed policies will likely need to change surrounding how we manage COVID-19, and I request your patience and understanding as we navigate the time ahead.

Please know that we are here to support you and if you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact us. I anticipate some of you may be unhappy that Repromed has placed additional restrictions and screening on unvaccinated patients. I wish this was not required, but all of us at Repromed take our duty of care to patients seriously and we must make these changes to minimise risk. Rest assured that we are regularly reviewing new information as it comes to hand and discussing how we need to adapt to ensure our patients', our staff's and the South Australian community's safety at all times.

Best wishes for the festive season ahead and hopefully we can all experience a less stressful 2022.

Kind regards,

Kelton Tremellen
Medical Director, Repromed