INTERIM CLINICAL GUIDANCE FOR PATIENTS SUSPECTED OF/CONFIRMED WITH COVID-19 IN BELGIUM

16 mars 2020; Version 3

1. Preliminary note

This document has been finalized on the 16th of March 2020 to provide support to the diverse groups of Belgian clinicians (general practitioners, emergency physicians, infectious disease specialists, pneumologists, intensive care physicians) who will have to face suspected/confirmed COVID-19 cases, during the amplification phase of the epidemic in Belgium.

The guidance has been first developed by a task force: Dr Sabrina Van Ierssel, Universitair Ziekenhuis Antwerpen, UZA (Sabrina.VanIerssel@uza.be); Dr Nicolas Dauby, Hôpital Universitaire Saint-Pierre Bruxelles, HSP (Nicolas_Dauby@stpierre-bru.be); Dr Emmanuel Bottieau, Instituut voor Tropische Geneeskunde, ITG (ebottieau@itg.be). It has been revised in fast track by a larger group of physicians and scientists from different specialties/disciplines. It is based on the best (but very incomplete) clinical evidence that is currently available, and is purposed to become a “living guideline” which will be regularly updated each time new relevant scientific data will emerge (latest version will always be found via the same link). Readers are invited to send any additional comment, relevant publication, including from the grey literature, and contribution in priority to the small core group (ideally to all three provided mails). We think however that it is time to provide a guidance based on the protocols that are already in use in the two reference institutions (UZA and HSP) and on additional contributions (literature review by Sciensano, and review of drug availability by the AFMPS/FAGG).

COVID-19 is a mild viral illness in the vast majority of the patients (80%) but may cause severe pneumonitis (with subsequent complications) with substantial fatality rates in elderly and individuals with underlying diseases. About 20% of infected patients need to be admitted, including 5% who require intensive care. Mortality in admitted patients reached 25% in the middle of the epidemic in Wuhan [1]. This document will not elaborate in detail the generic and supportive management of such infections (except if there are some pathogen-specific interventions). It is also not aimed at providing a new extensive review on all potential investigational treatments in the pipeline. We have opted for a short document with synoptic Tables summarizing:

(1) the selected investigational drugs to consider for CLINICAL USE at this moment in Belgium, with information on in vitro/in vivo efficacy;
(2) the current therapeutic recommendations for each category of COVID-19 patients, with indications and precautions;
(3) the treatment protocols that are in use in some other European countries, as obtained at the beginning of March 2020.

Rows will be added or subtracted to these Tables according to new evidence and recommendations, through regular updates.
IMPORTANT:
At the time being, the use of investigational or off label medicinal products to treat patients suspected or confirmed COVID 19 should be restricted to hospital use. We just do not know their clinical efficacy so far. They should therefore not divert health professionals from the optimal supportive care that still provides the highest probability of favorable outcome. Also patients should be each time adequately informed about the uncertain efficacy and respective toxicities of the drugs, and give consent (oral or signed according to the institutions). Participation to multicentric trials will be explored in some hospitals whenever possible but use of standardized case report form during patient management will be strongly encouraged to obtain a fast feedback on any safety issue (in elaboration for remdesivir which is an investigational drug).

Of note, lopinavir/ritonavir and (hydroxy)chloroquine are drugs registered in Belgium for other indications, so that the normal pathway for notification of adverse events has to be used¹. For compassionate use of Remdesivir and import of chloroquine base, please refer to Annex 1.

### 2. Summary of efficacy data of selected drugs

Table 1: *In vitro* / *in vivo* efficacy of the drugs selected for treatment of suspected/confirmed COVID-19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drug</th>
<th><em>In vitro</em> activity</th>
<th><em>In vivo</em> activity (animal models)</th>
<th>Clinical studies</th>
<th>Mechanism of action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SARS-CoV-1</td>
<td>MERS-CoV</td>
<td>SARS-CoV-2</td>
<td>SARS-CoV-1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remdesivir / GS5734</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>+++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(compassionate use)</td>
<td>[2,3]</td>
<td>2-5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloroquine phosphate</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+/-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(not marketed in Belgium, but available via import; also available as magistral preparation as chloroquine phosphate; 500mg chloroquine phosphate = 300mg chloroquine base); Used for malaria</td>
<td>[8,9]</td>
<td>[10]</td>
<td>[6]</td>
<td>[11]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Via links:
www.notifieruneffetindesirable.be or https://www.fagg.be/nl/melden_van_een_bijwerking_als_gezondheidszorgbeoefenaar
### Hydroxychloroquine (Plaquenil®);

+/- [13]  
Not studied  
+++ [14]  
Not studied  
Not studied  
Ongoing for SARS-CoV-2  
NCT04261517

Used for lupus, rheumatoid arthritis

Not fully elucidated but assumed to be similar to that of chloroquine

### Lopinavir/ritonavir (Kaletra®);

+/- [15–17]  
- [18]  
Not studied  
Not studied  
+/- [4,19]  
Weak efficacy for SARS-CoV-1; associated with ribavirin & corticosteroids [17]  
Ongoing study for MERS-CoV; associated with interferon (MIRACLE trial)  
Negative results for SARS-CoV-2 ? [20]; NCT04252885  
SARS-CoV-2 protease inhibition?

Used in HIV infection

### Note:
Many other drugs have been/are being investigated, including (list not exhaustive) ribavirin, fabiravir, favipiravir, oseltamivir, darunavir/cobicistat, interferon, mycophenolate, tocilizumab, etc see Landscape analysis of therapeutics WHO 17/02/2020, at [https://www.who.int/blueprint/priority-diseases/key-action/Table_of_therapeutics_Appendix_17022020.pdf?ua=1](https://www.who.int/blueprint/priority-diseases/key-action/Table_of_therapeutics_Appendix_17022020.pdf?ua=1).

Treatment guidelines used in other countries are indicated in Annex 2.

The preliminary selection of the three drugs relies on *(in vitro)* efficacy, availability and known safety profile. Key points on safety profile are found in Table 2 and an extensive safety profile and/or SmPC of the proposed drugs can be found in Annex 3. The safety profile of chloroquine can be considered as similar to that of hydroxychloroquine.

### 3. Belgian recommendations for supportive care and adjunctive antiviral treatment for suspected/confirmed COVID-19 cases, according to disease severity.

**General guiding principles**

Experience with other viral infections tell us that antiviral therapy should be administered as early as possible after symptom onset for optimal effectiveness.

- Chloroquine has good *in vitro* activity against SARS-CoV-2 and seems to reduce the duration of viral shedding. This does not mean that this will be translated in clinical efficacy (many previous experiences were disappointing). Results of ongoing clinical trials are eagerly awaited. This drug has been used for decades (at a total of 25 mg/kg within 3 days) for malaria treatment without any monitoring and side effects, including in pregnant women. However, the therapeutic window is quite narrow (cardiotoxicity/arrhythmia), requiring caution for use at higher cumulative dosages. For this reason, we strongly recommend that its use in
suspected/confirmed COVID-19 be restricted to hospitalized patients. A very recent article suggests that hydroxychloroquine (drug marketed in Belgium as Plaquenil®) is more potent than chloroquine in vitro, so that lower dosages (than initially recommended) could be used [14]. This option has been therefore preferred in this guideline since therapy will be required mostly in older patients and/or in case of severe disease. Since availability of hydroxychloroquine in sufficient quantity might become a problem, instructions for the chloroquine use will be also provided, but more caution will be required.

- Lopinavir/ritonavir has not convincingly demonstrated clinical efficacy so far (since it has been associated with other drugs with potential toxicity such as interferon-beta or ribavirin), and remains therefore a second choice for the moment, when hydroxychloroquine is contraindicated.
- Remdesivir seems promising in vitro (and in some case reports) but availability will remain a key issue for the coming weeks (very restricted use, to the most severe patients, but with also numerous exclusion criteria [see Table 2], which is unfortunately not the best scenario to test this drug). Several clinical trials are ongoing.

In accordance with WHO interim guidance [21] and a Correspondence in the Lancet [22], corticosteroids are not recommended as a systemic adjunctive treatment. Concerns have also emerged in the social media related to the theoretical interferences between ACE2 receptors (used for viral entry) and some medicines such as angiotensin converting enzyme (ACE) inhibitors /angiotensin receptor blockers (ARBs) as well as non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). There is so far no scientific evidence of any deleterious effect, and therefore no robust instruction regarding their use. By safety however and while waiting pending results, paracetamol may be preferred as first-line symptomatic treatment of pain and fever (at usual dosage), while NSAIDs should be used with caution and according to common practice (contra-indicated in case of renal failure for example). In the same line physicians could CONSIDER in ADMITTED CONFIRMED COVID-19 patients to switch ACE inhibitors/ARBs to an equivalent therapy, BUT changes are not advised in suspected/confirmed patients treated at home where no monitoring is possible (the risks outweighing by far the hypothetical benefits). Any suspected adverse events related to these drugs should be reported through the usual channels, as part of regular pharmacovigilance activities ².

The table below is aimed to provide some guidance for adjunctive antiviral treatment (together with optimal supportive care). Comments and suggestions for clarity and feasibility are more than welcome by the writing team. As written above, the latest version of this clinical guidance will always be found via the same link. For all procedures with regards to patient general management (clinical assessment, testing, isolation, reporting etc.), please refer to procedures available at https://epidemio.wiv-isp.be/ID/Pages/2019-nCoV_procedures.aspx. Please note that these Sciensano procedures are also continuously being updated according to the evolution of the epidemic and new clinical evidence. To receive the alerts on procedure or clinical guidance updates, please subscribe at https://epidemio.wiv-isp.be/ID/Pages/2019-nCoV.aspx.

It is important for the clinician to be aware that the critical period for complications is 5 to 7 days after symptom onset. Non-hospitalized patients and discharged patients should be advised to recontact their treating physician in case of clinical deterioration (ex. dyspnea), and reevaluation (ex by daily phone contact) should be considered on case by case evaluation depending on risk factors, social isolation etc.

² via www.notifieruneffetindesirable.be or https://www.fagg.be/nl/melden_van_een_bijwerking_als_gezondheidszorgbeoefenaar
Table 2: Supportive care & antiviral treatment of hospitalized patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clinical category</th>
<th>Supportive Care</th>
<th>Additional antiviral therapy</th>
<th>Precautions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suspicion of COVID-19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Mild-to-moderate symptoms (no dyspnea)</td>
<td>Symptomatic treatment</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Use paracetamol in first-line (usual dosage), and NSAIDs with caution (if really required)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ No risk group³ ex. Hospitalization for social-related reasons</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspicion of COVID-19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Case by case discussion, if possible with an Infectious Disease Specialist, to initiate an empirical antiviral therapy, based on the potential delay to obtain results (antiviral therapy is expected to be more efficient if started early in the course of the disease).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Mild-to-moderate symptoms (no dyspnea)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>If decision to treat empirically, follow the treatment options as described for “CONFIRMED CASES”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➢ Risk group¹</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Or Suspicion of COVID-19 AND alarming symptoms (dyspnea)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmed COVID-19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
|    ➢ Mild-to-moderate disease (no O2 requirement/no evidence of pneumonia) | Symptomatic treatment | Consider start hydroxychloroquine (Plaquenil®) IF NO CONTRA-INDICATION  
• 400 mg at suspicion/diagnosis;  
• 400 mg 12 h later  
• Followed by 200 mg BID up to Day 5  
  
NB: stop hydroxychloroquine if follow-up at home  
If no hydroxychloroquine available, consider chloroquine base 600 mg (10mg/kg) at diagnosis and 300mg (5 mg/kg) 12 h later, followed by 300 mg (5 mg/kg) BID up to Day 5 or chloroquine phosphate 1000mg at diagnosis and 500mg 12h later, followed by 300mg BID up to day | Contra- indications  
➢ QTC > 500 msec  
➢ drug interaction; check at http://www.covid19-druginteractions.org (Liverpool)  
Interaction potential of hydroxychloroquine is likely the same as chloroquine  
➢ Myasthenia gravis  
➢ Porphyria  
➢ Retinal pathology  
➢ Epilepsy  

NB: pregnancy is not a contra-indication as such (large safety experience with chloroquine); see risk/benefit balance  
Perform ECG daily if initial QTC 450-500 msec, and biochemistry according to underlying disease |

³ Risk groups: age > 65 years AND/OR underlying end organ dysfunction (lung, heart, liver,...), diabetes, coronaropathy, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, arterial hypertension
### Confirmed COVID-19
#### Severe disease

≥ 1 of the following:
- Respiratory rate
  - ≥30/min (adults);
  - ≥40/min (children < 5)
- Blood oxygen saturation ≤93%
- PaO2/FiO2 ratio < 300
- Lung infiltrates > 50% of the lung field within 24-48 hours

Optimal supportive care in hospital WARD (or ICU)

Provide O2

Consider carefully antibiotics or antifungals according to local epidemiology

Start hydroxychloroquine (Plaquenil®) IF NO CONTRA-INDICATION
- 400 mg at diagnosis;
- 400 mg 12 h later
- Followed by 200 mg BID up to Day 5

NB: If no hydroxychloroquine available, consider chloroquine base 600 mg (10 mg/kg) at diagnosis and 300 mg (5 mg/kg) 12 h later, followed by 300 mg (5 mg/kg) BID up to Day 5 OR chloroquine phosphate 1000 mg at diagnosis and 500 mg 12 h later, followed by 300 mg BID up to Day 5

Consider lopinavir/ritonavir 400/100 mg (= 2 tablets of 200/50 mg) BID for 14 days) as second choice if hydroxychloroquine/chloroquine contra-indicated (check also drug interaction!); or in children < 10 kg (after IDS advice)

#### Critical disease

≥ 1 of the following:
- Acute Respiratory Distress Syndrome
- Sepsis
- Altered consciousness
- Multi-organ failure

Optimal supportive care in ICU

Mechanical ventilation

Specific prevention & treatment of ARDS

Track secondary bacterial and opportunistic (Aspergillus) infections

Prevention of sub-sequent lung fibrosis

NB: ongoing studies with

Start Remdesivir (compassionate use)
- 200 mg loading dose (IV, within 30 min)
- 100 mg OD for 2 to 10 days

If remdesivir unavailable: Consider (hydroxy)chloroquine, crushed in nasogastric tube, at the same dosage and monitoring as above; replace with remdesivir if it becomes available

However, since the clinical efficacy of (hydroxy)chloroquine is not demonstrated, caution is required in case of kidney/liver/cardiac failure, and

**At this moment very restricted availability of remdesivir (long delay for supply) and very strict criteria released by Gilead**

**Inclusion criteria**
- ICU + confirmation SARS-Cov-2 by PCR + mechanical ventilation

**Exclusion criteria**
- Evidence of MOF
- Need of inotropic agents
- Creatinine clearance < 30 ml/min, dialysis, or hemofiltration
- Transaminases > 5X ULN
- Concomitant use of lopinavir/ritonavir drug

This means that most (if not all) patients in ICU will not be eligible.

Still limited information on drug interaction is available. Risk-benefit assessment should be made

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### Contra-indications

- QTc > 500 msec
- Drug interaction (check at http://www.covid19-druginteractions.org (Liverpool))
  - Interaction potential of hydroxychloroquine is likely the same as chloroquine
- Myasthenia gravis
- Porphyria
- Retinal pathology
- Epilepsy

NB: pregnancy is not a contra-indication as such (large safety experience with chloroquine); see risk/benefit balance

Perform basic biochemistry daily and ECG daily if initial QTc > 450 msec (+ other indicated investigations)

Avoid quinolones and macrolides if possible, or monitor closely the QT if these antibiotics are needed
4. Annexes

Annex 1: Procedures

Emergency Compassionate use procedure (as stated in art 107/1 (link))

When using Remdesivir for compassionate use, a notification to umn@fagg-afmps.be and to the ethics committee of the concerned site is to be made. The notification should include the following information:

- The name of the sponsor
- The name of the treating physician
- A sworn statement from the physician that the informed consent was obtained in accordance with the law of 22 August 2002 on patient rights
- The indication
- The motivation that without appropriate treatment, it is expected that the patient’s death occurs in a short delay or that the risk for the consequences of the absence of treatment is greater than the risk for the consequences of starting the treatment is included. Please discuss the indication of the patient as well as the previous treatments that the patient received, the unmet need and the benefit/risk balance of treatment along with the urgency for this treatment.

Import (as stated in art 105 (link))

Chloroquine base can be imported from NL (A-CQ 100) or FR (Nivaquine) with a prescription and a doctor’s statement (see bijlage VI van de geneesmiddelenwet, annexe VI de la loi sur les médicaments) directed to the hospital pharmacy. However availability is subject to change.

If you have problems obtaining the medicinal products in this guideline, please contact coronashortages@fagg-afmps.be.
Annex 2: Therapies for confirmed COVID-19 in some European countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disease category</th>
<th>Italy (Lombardia protocol)</th>
<th>France</th>
<th>Netherlands</th>
<th>Switzerland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ Mild-to-moderate disease</td>
<td>No antiviral treatment</td>
<td>No antiviral treatment</td>
<td>No antiviral treatment</td>
<td>No antiviral treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ No risk group</td>
<td>lopinavir/ritonavir + chloroquine or hydroxychloroquine for 5-7 days</td>
<td>Consider lopinavir/ritonavir; duration depending on monitoring of viral excretion</td>
<td>Consider chloroquine for 5 days</td>
<td>? (not mentioned)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Severe disease | remdesivir + chloroquine or hydroxychloroquine for 5-20 days (if no remdesivir: maintain lopinavir/ritonavir with chloroquine) | remdesivir; duration depending on monitoring of viral excretion (No second choice) | chloroquine D1 (600-300 mg; D2-D5 300 mg BID) | Lopinavir/ritonavir (atazanavir/ritonavir as second choice) |

| Critical disease | remdesivir + chloroquine or hydroxychloroquine for 5-20 days (if no remdesivir: maintain lopinavir/ritonavir with chloroquine) | remdesivir (for 10 days) + chloroquine (for 5 days) | remdesivir as first choice (for 10 days) | Lopinavir/ritonavir (+ hydroxychloroquine if < 65 years/no comorbidity) as second choice (if remdesivir unavailable). Tocilizumab (in case of MOF and inotropic support) |

Annex 3: Safety profiles

Safety profile remdesivir.pdf
Safety profile chloroquine.pdf
Kaletra RCP.pdf
Kaletra SKP.pdf
Plaquenil RCP.pdf
Plaquenil SKP.pdf

Please download this document (rather than visualize in Web browser) to enable these links to pdf documents to work
References


**Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2).** *Clin Infect Dis* Published Online First: 9 March 2020. doi:10.1093/cid/ciaa237


