

COVID-19 AND NURSING HOMES

What Residents and Family Need to Know

Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is an infectious disease caused by a new virus. It can lead to respiratory illness with symptoms such as a cough, fever, and shortness of breath. In a growing number of cases, it can be more severe than the flu, with a higher mortality rate. Certain populations are more at risk of getting this virus, including individuals age 60 or older and people of any age with serious underlying medical conditions.

In an effort to reduce the spread of the virus in nursing homes, the federal government has:

- Focused efforts and resources only on inspections related to infection control and investigation of complaints assessed as being the most serious and harmful to residents.
- Restricted visitation of:
 - Visitors/Family members, who are only permitted in compassionate care situations, such as end of life, and only if they show no signs/symptoms of COVID-19.
 - Non-essential health care workers.
 - Long-term care ombudsmen.
- Directed facilities to actively screen residents and staff for fever and signs/symptoms of COVID-19.
- Instructed facilities to cancel communal dining and all group activities.

Residents and families can stay connected in a number of ways, including:

- Sending handwritten letters and cards.
- Using technology, such as video conferencing (Skype, FaceTime), Facebook, text message, or email.
- Making video greetings, including through apps such as WhatsApp and Marco Polo.
- “Visiting” through a window or glass door.

See the Consumer Voice website and Facebook page for other examples of how residents and families are staying connected.
Use #lovefromadistance.

The nursing home should be taking steps to prevent and control COVID-19

Staff should:

- Wear personal protective equipment, such as facemasks and gloves.
- Wash their hands or use hand sanitizer before and after contact with each resident, after using medical equipment, and after taking off masks, gowns, and/or gloves.
- Place alcohol-based hand sanitizer in all resident-care areas, including both inside and outside resident rooms.
- Practice cough etiquette/hygiene.
- Stay home when sick.
- Clean residents' hands after toileting or eating.
- Clean and disinfect medical equipment between residents and areas of the facility.

Administration should:

- Complete a special assessment developed by the federal government to determine if the facility's infection control plan and protections are adequate to address COVID-19.
- Communicate frequently with local and state Departments of Health, Emergency Management, and CDC to share facility conditions, obtain the most up-to-date information and resources, and ask for help as needed.
- Put a plan in place for frequent communication with residents and families about facility conditions and individual resident updates.

What to do if there are concerns about the facility's infection control practices or other issues

- Talk to the director of nursing or administrator about your concerns and ask what they will do to address them.
- Contact the Long-Term Care Ombudsman program for assistance. The Ombudsman program advocates for residents and can help resolve concerns. To locate the program that covers the facility, go to: https://theconsumervoice.org/get_help.
- File a complaint with your state survey agency.
 - This agency is currently focusing only on complaints classified as "Immediate Jeopardy," which means that the problem/concern has caused or could cause serious harm, injury, impairment, or death. If you believe your concern rises to that level, make sure to indicate that in your complaint.
 - File a complaint even if you don't think it is Immediate Jeopardy. The complaint will still be entered into the system. The federal government will be issuing guidance about how these complaints will be handled.

To find contact information for the survey agency, go to: https://theconsumervoice.org/get_help.

While several changes and limitations have been temporarily put in place because of the COVID-19 crisis,

residents still have the right to:

- Receive the care and services needed to obtain their highest possible level of well-being.
- Participate in developing and implementing a person-centered plan of care that reflects personal and cultural preferences. This includes the resident's right to make decisions about their care now and in the future, such as what treatment they might want related to COVID-19.
- Be free from abuse, neglect, exploitation, and misappropriation of resident property.
- Voice grievances without discrimination or retaliation, or the fear of it, and prompt efforts by the facility to resolve those grievances.
- Not be discharged or transferred except for certain reasons, to appeal the decision, and have a safe and orderly discharge/transfer if the resident leaves the facility.

Residents and families can promote good, safe care and keep up resident morale

Residents can:

- Wash their hands (or ask staff to assist them) or use hand sanitizer and remind other residents to do the same.
- Practice social distancing from other residents – stay 6 feet away.
- Inform supervisors/administration if they observe staff who appear to be sick or not taking the steps listed above to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
- Request that the administrator:
 - Provide regular updates to residents about what the facility is doing to prevent the spread of COVID-19 and/or care for any residents who are ill.
 - Share the results of the facility's self-assessment of its infection control practices.
- Ask facility staff to schedule a regular time for residents to communicate with their family and to assist them if they need help.
- Remember that they can still use the facility's grievance process if they have any complaints or concerns.
- Consider ways to keep the resident council going, even if residents cannot meet in person. Perhaps residents can bring up issues by sending notes or talking by phone to the resident council president, who can then convey them to the designated staff person.
- Ask activities staff to find creative ways to continue regular activities even with residents in their rooms, such as playing bingo using call lights or conducting an exercise class via video chat.

Families can:

- Find out what steps the facility is taking to keep residents safe. Request that the administrator tell families how the facility performed on its self-assessment.
- Ask how the facility will provide updates on their loved one and whom they should contact if they have questions.
- Request the facility set up a schedule for when they can connect with their loved one by phone, video, “window visiting,” or other method.
- Ask the administrator to seek permission from the family of other residents to share their email addresses with each other. Families can create a group email and use it to communicate with other family members, bring questions and concerns to the facility or the Ombudsman program, or provide support to one another.

For more information on this issue, go to:

<https://theconsumervoice.org/issues/other-issues-and-resources/covid-19>

The National Consumer Voice for Quality Long-Term Care

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