



Fact Sheet

Families and residents on restricted visits to residential aged care facilities

06/04/2020

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic the Commonwealth, state and territory governments have put in place new restrictions to protect older Australians living in residential aged care facilities. This fact sheet aims to explain these restrictions and the reasons behind them.

What is COVID-19 (coronavirus)?

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that cause respiratory infections. These can range from the common cold to more serious diseases. COVID-19 is the disease caused by a new coronavirus (SARS-COV-2). It was first reported in December 2019 in Wuhan City in China. It has now become a global pandemic.

How is it spread?

The infection can spread from person to person through:

- direct contact with droplets from an infected person coughing or sneezing
- touching objects or surfaces (like doorknobs or tables) that have droplets on them from an infected person, and then touching your mouth or face.

People with COVID-19 are infectious from approximately 24 hours before they get symptoms.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of COVID-19 are similar to colds and influenza and can include:

- Fever
- Sore throat
- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Fatigue



Why is this infection so dangerous for older people?

The risk of serious illness from COVID-19 increases with age. The highest rate of fatalities is among older people, particularly those with other serious health conditions or a weakened immune system. There is currently no cure or vaccine for COVID-19.

For people living with dementia or some form of cognitive impairment, the ability to follow instructions to reduce their risk of getting COVID-19 or to alert others about potential symptoms may be a challenge. This is especially so where there is a limited capacity to communicate verbally or express pain and discomfort.

To protect older Australians and those with compromised immune systems we all need to work together to help stop the spread of COVID-19.

For Families

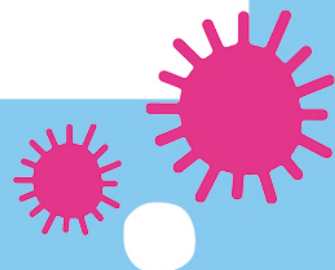
I have a relative in a residential aged care facility, can I visit them?

The Australian Government has put restrictions in place to protect residents and workers in residential aged care facilities (RACF).

The following people will not be permitted entry to residential aged care facilities:

- People who have returned from overseas in the last 14 days
- People who have been in contact with a confirmed case of COVID-19 in the last 14 days
- People with fever or symptoms of acute respiratory infection (e.g. cough, sore throat, runny nose, shortness of breath)
- People who do not have an up-to-date (i.e. 2020) influenza vaccination
- Children aged 16 years and under (exemptions can be assessed on a case-by-case basis, for example, where the resident is in palliative care).

Care providers understand the difficulty that these new arrangements will pose for families and should manage cases compassionately, especially when it relates to end-of-life situations, palliative care and dementia units.



Why do some facilities have more restrictions on visits?

In addition to guidance from the Commonwealth Government, states and territories are implementing guidelines for their own settings, as are individual aged care providers. Some aged care providers are asking all visitors to stay away in order to protect the older people living in the facility. In these cases, there is usually a process the provider has in place for exceptions, such as when a loved one is very unwell. If you are unable to visit someone and feel that it is important to do so call the facility to understand what processes are in place. If you have concerns with the facility's actions, contact the Older Person's Advocacy Network on **1800 237 981** or the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission on **1800 951 822**.

How will my visit be different to previous visits?

If an RACF where you visit is accepting visitors the current restrictions will likely mean changes in the way you go about your visit. These include:

- Limiting visits to a short duration
- Limiting visitors to a maximum of two visitors at one time per day
- Conducting visits in a resident's room, outdoors, or in a specific area designated by the aged care facility, rather than in a communal area where the risk of transmission to residents is greater
- Showing evidence that you have received your 2020 influenza vaccination.

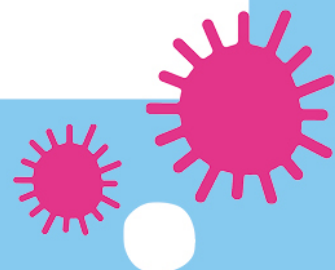
All visitors must continue to practise social distancing, including maintaining a distance of 1.5 metres between yourself and others at all times.

Should I continue to visit older friends and relatives in RACFs?

If you don't absolutely have to visit, please don't.

It's best to keep in touch via phone and video calls, send postcards, photos or artwork, or film short videos to share.

If you regularly visit someone living with a cognitive impairment, consider other ways of maintaining social contact. This will help reassure individuals who may feel anxious about possible changes to their day to day life. For more information you can contact the National Dementia Helpline on **1800 100 500**.



What else can I do to protect my loved one in aged care?

Even if you are feeling well, it is important to take steps to prevent the spread of this virus. Good hygiene and taking care when interacting with other people is the best defence for you and your family against COVID-19. Steps you can take include:

- Covering your coughs and sneezes with your elbow or a tissue
- Disposing of tissues immediately after they are used, into a waste bin and washing your hands
- Practising frequent hand hygiene. This means washing your hands often with soap and water, or using an alcohol-based hand sanitiser, including before and after eating, after going to the toilet, and when you have been out in public
- Using alcohol-based hand sanitisers, where available
- Cleaning and disinfecting surfaces you touch regularly
- Keeping a distance of at least 1.5 metres between yourself and others as part of social distancing
- If you are sick, avoiding contact with others.

If you start to feel unwell, phone the National Coronavirus Helpline on **1800 020 080** or your GP who will be able to provide you with further advice.

For Residents

Why can't I see my family?

Your family may have to limit their visits to help you keep safe and so we can stop the spread of COVID-19.

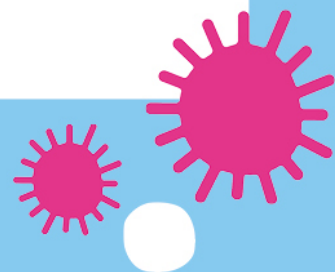
Visits will be limited to two people per visit and children aged 16 and under will not be permitted, except in exceptional circumstances.

Unless it's absolutely critical that your visitors come to see you face to face, you should consider asking them not to. Stay in touch by video call or over the phone.

These changes are designed to protect you and other residents from COVID-19.

Why can't I see my relatives aged 16 and under?

We understand this restriction will be difficult for some families. However, children are not always reliable when it comes to practising the good hygiene necessary to stop the spread of COVID-19.



What about palliative care?

Providers are expected to show compassion and make sensible decisions on a case-by-case basis, including in relation to children, for residents in palliative care.

When will these restrictions finish?

These are temporary restrictions and will be relaxed on the advice of the Chief Medical Officer and State and Territory Chief Health Officers. You should plan for these restrictions to be in place for a number of months.

What if I'm being admitted from another facility?

Screening for symptoms of COVID-19 in residents being admitted or re-admitted from other health facilities and community settings should be conducted.

Further information can be found in the CDNA National Guidelines:

<https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/03/covid-19-national-health-plan-supporting-the-mental-health-of-australians-through-the-coronavirus-pandemic.pdf>

Is there a chance these restrictions will become even stricter?

The COVID-19 is a rapidly evolving health emergency. The situation is changing by the day – and in order to protect you and your fellow residents further changes to restrictions may be made.

More information

For the latest advice, information and resources, go to <http://www.health.gov.au>

Call the National Coronavirus Health Information Line on **1800 020 080**. It operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If you require translating or interpreting services, call **131 450**.

The phone number of your state or territory public health agency is available at <http://www.health.gov.au/state-territory-contacts>

If you have concerns about your health, speak to a doctor.

If you, a family member or friend needs crisis support, please call Lifeline on **13 11 14**.

The Australian Government's mental health response is available at:

<https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/03/covid-19-national-health-plan-supporting-the-mental-health-of-australians-through-the-coronavirus-pandemic.pdf>

