

Holiday Visits and COVID-19

With COVID-19 rates increasing throughout the country, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is urging all of us to celebrate virtually or just with members of our own household (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/daily-life-coping/holidays.html>). And because nursing home residents are particularly at risk, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) has taken the unusual step of issuing an alert with recommendations to residents, their families and representatives and nursing homes (<https://www.cms.gov/files/document/covid-facility-holiday-recommendations.pdf>).

This fact sheet summarizes the key points in the alert and provides additional information from the National Consumer Voice for Quality Long-Term Care to help families as they determine how best to include their loved ones in their holiday plans.

CMS Alert

Throughout the Holidays

- Families and residents should continue to follow guidelines for visitation and adhere to the core principles of infection prevention. This includes remaining six feet or more apart, wearing a face covering, and limiting the number of family visiting at any one time.
- Nursing homes should find creative ways to celebrate the holidays without having parties or gatherings.
- Staff should use extra caution during the holidays and follow CDC recommendations for their own gatherings with families and friends outside of work to protect the vulnerable residents they care for.

Leaving the nursing home for the holidays

- CMS advises against residents leaving the nursing home because doing so could increase a resident's risk for exposure. The risk may be further increased by factors such as a resident's health status, the spread of COVID-19 in the community (e.g., cases or positivity rate), or attendance at large gatherings.
- Nursing home staff should discuss the risks of leaving the facility with residents and families and encourage alternative means of connecting, such as by phone or video.
- If a resident chooses to leave the facility, CMS outlines numerous measures to take, such as performing hand hygiene often and verbally greeting others instead of giving hugs or shaking hands.
- Residents and family members should report to nursing home staff if they have had any exposure to COVID-19 while outside of the nursing home.
- Upon a resident's return, CMS urges nursing homes to:
 - Screen and increase monitoring for signs and symptoms.
 - Test a resident for COVID-19 if signs or symptoms are present or if a resident or their family reports possible exposure to COVID-19 while outside the nursing home.
 - Place the resident on transmission-based precautions (TBP), such as being quarantined, if the resident or family member reports possible exposure to COVID-19 or if the resident has signs or symptoms of COVID-19 upon return.
 - Consider placing residents on TBP if they were away from the nursing home for more than 24 hours.

Additional Points to Consider

Know Your State's policies around visitation. Check with your state's Department of Health or Long-Term Care Ombudsman Program for more information. Find the latest CMS guidance and links to state policies at <https://theconsumervoice.org/issues/other-issues-and-resources/visitation>.

Visitation at the facility

- Reach out to your loved one's facility now to learn about the current visitation policy and visitation options during the holidays. Remember that:
 - Indoor visits are generally restricted when there has been a case of COVID among residents or staff during the past 14 days or the COVID-19 county positive rate is high.
 - Facilities may not restrict visitation without an adequate clinical or safety reason.
- Schedule a time to visit either in person or virtually as early as possible. If the facility cannot accommodate so many requests, you may need to celebrate on a different day. Consider the holidays as a season, not as a specific day.
- Find out about testing and PPE requirements in advance.

Leaving the facility

CMS is strongly discouraging taking residents out of facilities at this time because of rising COVID-19 rates.

If you are considering taking your loved one out of the facility for the holiday, think about the following before you make a decision:

- Does your loved one want to leave the facility to attend a family gathering? Make sure that taking them home is their decision!
- What are the facility's policies for taking a loved one home during the holiday and then returning? Request them in writing. A facility may not refuse to allow a resident to return after a holiday visit. Contact your long-term care ombudsman program or state survey agency if you need assistance.
- What are the risks and consequences of leaving the facility? These may include:
 - Increased risk of exposure.
 - Testing upon return.
 - Quarantine upon return.
 - Would your loved one have to stay in a room that isn't theirs?
 - What accommodations will be made if there aren't enough resident rooms in the facility to quarantine your loved one? For example, would the facility be able to use dining rooms, therapy or activity rooms if necessary?

Where to go for help

If you encounter problems with visiting your loved one at their facility or when you bring them back:

- Contact your Long-Term Care Ombudsman program for assistance. The Ombudsman program advocates for residents and can help resolve concerns.
- File a complaint with your state survey agency. This agency is responsible for regulating and overseeing nursing homes in your state. One of its duties is to investigate complaints.

You can find contact information for both the Ombudsman program and the State Survey Agency at https://theconsumervoice.org/get_help.