



# FACT SHEET

## Families and residents on restricted visits to residential aged care facilities

19 June 2020

To protect older Australians living in residential aged care facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, Governments have put restrictions on visits. We continue to move towards a COVIDSafe Australia and ease restrictions around the country. During this time some restrictions will remain in place for aged care facilities to protect older Australians. Other restrictions are being eased. This fact sheet aims to explain the 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 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 48 hours before they get symptoms.

### What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of COVID-19 are similar to colds and influenza and may be mild. They can include:

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

## Why is this virus 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. The rate is higher for 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 it may be difficult to:

- follow instructions to reduce their risk of getting COVID-19, or
- alert others about potential symptoms.

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 weakened immune systems from COVID-19 we all need to work together.

## For Families

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

Governments have put restrictions in place to protect residents and workers in residential aged care facilities (RACF).

The following people cannot enter 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 who are unwell, including with a fever or symptoms of acute respiratory illness (e.g. cough, sore throat, runny nose, shortness of breath)
- People who do not have an up-to-date (i.e. 2020) flu vaccination.

Children of all ages can now visit RACFs. All visitors, including children, must follow any restrictions. This includes visitor numbers, physical distancing and personal hygiene.

Facilities should not allow large group visits.

Care providers understand any limits on visits may pose challenges for families. Providers should manage cases compassionately. This includes giving special consideration to end-of-life situations, palliative care and dementia units.

## Why do some facilities have more restrictions on visits?

In addition to national guidance, State and Territory authorities implement guidelines that reflect local conditions. Individual aged care providers might also implement restrictions that relate to their setting. This may happen when there is an outbreak near or in the facility.

Aged care peak bodies and consumer advocacy organisations have released an [Industry Code for Visiting Residential Aged Care Homes during COVID-19](#). The Code includes the rights and responsibilities of providers, residents and visitors. Under the Code, providers should allow residents to have visitors in a way that minimises the risk of introducing or spreading COVID-19 in the facility.

If you are unable to visit someone 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?

When you visit a facility you need to:

- limit visits to a maximum of two visitors at one time per resident
- conduct visits in a resident's room, outdoors, or in a specific area designated by the aged care facility
- not visit in communal areas with other residents
- show evidence you have received your 2020 flu vaccination.

There is no time limit on visits from spouses, other close relatives and social supports.

All visitors must practise physical distancing, staying 1.5 metres away from other people whenever possible.

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

Yes. If you are well you should continue to visit friends and relatives in aged care facilities. Sometimes you can't visit a resident in aged care as often as you would like. There are other ways to keep in touch and stay connected. You can keep in touch by:

- phone calls
- video calls
- social communication apps
- sending a postcard
- sharing photos, artwork, or short home videos

If you often visit someone living with a cognitive impairment, consider other ways to maintain 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 about outings?

Residents can leave facilities to attend small family gatherings. This includes close friends, partners, couples and siblings/familial groups in a facility. You will need to tell the facility the location of the outing, the number of people involved and the date.

## 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 staying 1.5m away from other people are the best defences against COVID-19 for you and your family. Steps you can take include:

- Supervising any children who are with you to make sure they follow physical distancing and hygiene advice
- Covering your coughs and sneezes with your elbow or a tissue
- Disposing of used tissues into a bin immediately and washing your hands
- Washing your hands often with soap and water, or using an alcohol-based hand sanitiser. This includes before and after eating, after going to the toilet, and when you have been out in public
- Cleaning and disinfecting surfaces you touch regularly
- Keeping a distance of at least 1.5 metres between yourself and others
- 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. They will provide you with further advice.

## For Residents

### Can I see my family?

Yes. Spouses, other close relatives and social supports can visit you. There is no limit to the number of hours that they spend with you.

Only two people should visit you at the same time.

All visitors, including children, must follow any restrictions. This includes visitor numbers, physical distancing and personal hygiene.

If for any reason you can't have visitors, stay in touch by video call or phone.

If your local community has active cases of COVID-19, the facility may increase restrictions. For example, they may restrict visiting service providers. This is most likely if:

- there are cases in suburbs or towns surrounding the facility, and
- those cases have not been acquired overseas.

These arrangements protect you and other residents from COVID-19.

### Can I go on outings?

Yes. You can attend small family gatherings, including with close friends and family from your facility. You or your family will need to tell the facility the location of the outing, the number of people involved and the date.

Other external excursions for groups of residents are not permitted.

### Can I see my relatives aged 16 and under?

Yes. Children of all ages can visit. Children must be supervised at all times during the visit.

### What about palliative care?

Yes. Visits are allowed for palliative care. Sometimes the facility may need to increase their restrictions due to local circumstances. If so, providers are expected to show compassion and make sensible decisions on a case-by-case basis for residents receiving palliative care.

### When will these restrictions finish?

You should plan for these restrictions, at varying levels, to be in place for a number of months.

## What if I'm coming from another facility?

Facilities should screen residents entering or returning from other health facilities and community settings for symptoms of COVID-19.

Further information can be found in the CDNA National Guidelines:

<https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/cdna-song-novel-coronavirus.htm>

## Is there a chance these restrictions may increase?

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to change. The current restrictions reflect the low rates of COVID-19 transmission in Australia. Governments or individual facilities may decide to increase restrictions if the local or national situation changes.

## More information

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

Call the National Coronavirus Helpline 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**.

For other support with mental health and wellbeing, visit [headtohealth.gov.au](http://headtohealth.gov.au)