

Department of Health & Human Services
Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services
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Center for Clinical Standards and Quality/Quality Safety & Oversight Group

ALERT

To Nursing Homes, Residents, and Resident Family Member(s)/Representative(s),

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) public health emergency (PHE) has been one of our nation's greatest challenges and has especially taken a toll on the nation's nursing home residents. CMS is committed to protecting the health and safety of nursing home residents at all times and especially during the challenges presented by the spread of COVID-19. We understand the emotional impact that separation from loved ones has caused. In September, CMS [provided revised guidance](#) for how residents can safely receive visitors in the nursing home. With the holiday season fast approaching, we understand that residents and their families will want to spend more time together. During the holidays, facilities, residents, and visitors should continue to follow the guidelines for visitation and adhere to the core principles of infection prevention, such as remaining six feet or more apart, wearing a face covering, and limiting the number of visitors in the nursing home at any one time. We also recommend that facilities find innovative ways of celebrating the holidays without having parties or gatherings that could increase the risk of COVID-19 transmission (e.g., virtual parties or visits, provide seasonal music, movies, decorations, etc.).

We also know that some residents may want to leave the nursing home temporarily to visit family and friends for the holidays or other outings. While CMS supports family engagement and a resident's right to leave the nursing home, everyone needs to work together to take extra precautions to help reduce the spread of COVID-19, which can pose an elevated danger to the health of nursing home residents. Therefore, CMS recommends against residents leaving the nursing home during this PHE. With the potential for a safe and effective vaccine on the immediate horizon, extra precautions now are essential to protect nursing home residents until a vaccine becomes available. Leaving the nursing home could increase a resident's risk for exposure to COVID-19. 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. We encourage residents to discuss these and other risks with their families and nursing home staff. Nursing homes should educate residents and families of the risks of leaving the facility, the steps they should take to reduce the risk of contracting COVID-19, and encourage residents to stay connected with loved ones through alternative means of communication, such as phone and video communication. For examples of ways to connect with residents, refer to memorandum [QSO-20-28-NH](#). Should a resident ultimately choose to leave the nursing home, CMS is providing the following recommendations:

- Limit close contact (maintain physical distancing of six feet or more), keep gatherings as small as possible, and use technology to engage with others remotely;
- Wear facemasks or cloth face covering at all times (including in cars, homes, restaurants, etc.);
- Limit contact with commonly touched surfaces or shared items;
- Keep safe around food and drinks. Avoid communal serving utensils, passing of food, potluck or buffet style food service, and instead opt for individually prepared plates by a single server;
- Perform hand hygiene often (e.g., wash hands with soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer);
- Avoid large gatherings, crowded areas, and high-risk activities such as singing;
- For those attending a gathering, avoid contact with individuals outside of their household for 14 days prior to the gathering;
- Ask anyone who has signs or symptoms of COVID-19, or has been exposed to someone diagnosed with COVID-19, to not attend the gathering;

- If possible, conduct gatherings outdoors. Indoor gatherings should have good ventilation, open windows and doors if possible;
- Verbally greet others instead of shaking hands or giving hugs. Think ahead about how you will manage to prevent physical interactions with loved ones of different ages such as young children; and
- Check local conditions and state requirements for precautions and restrictions, including positivity rates and quarantine requirements, before crossing state lines.

CMS has collaborated with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on these recommendations, and we encourage you to review CDC's [webpage on holiday celebrations](#), which has more suggestions for preventing the spread of COVID-19.

Note to nursing home staff: Staff should also use extra caution, especially during the holidays. Staff should follow the same recommendations for residents and families regarding gathering with their families and friends outside of work to protect the vulnerable residents they care for.

Additionally, while the above actions can greatly reduce the risk of spreading COVID-19, due to the highly contagious nature of the virus, we recommend nursing homes take the following actions when residents return to the nursing home:

- 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. A nursing home may also opt to test residents without signs or symptoms if they leave the nursing home frequently or for a prolonged length of time, such as over 24 hours. For more information on testing guidelines see [CMS memorandum QSO-20-38-NH](#).
- Place the resident on transmission-based precautions (TBP) if the resident or family member reports possible exposure to COVID-19 while outside of the nursing home, or if the resident has signs or symptoms of COVID-19 upon return. Please note that residents and loved ones should report to the nursing home staff if they have had any exposure to COVID-19 while outside of the nursing home.
- Consider placing residents on TBP if they were away from the nursing homes for more than 24 hours.

As we progress through these challenging times, we express our sincere gratitude for everyone doing what they can to help protect nursing home residents. CMS' mission is to safeguard the health, safety, and quality of life for America's nursing home residents. While this year's holiday celebrations will undoubtedly be different than previous years, together we can still find safe ways residents can enjoy the holidays with family and friends.



CMS Administrator

This alert is prepared as a service to the public and is not intended to take the place of either the written law or regulations. We encourage readers to review the specific statutes, regulations, and other interpretive materials for a full and accurate statement of their contents.