

Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Senior Centers

Background

Countries around the world are experiencing expanding outbreaks of respiratory illness (COVID-19) caused by a novel coronavirus (SARS CoV-2). The virus is spreading from person-to-person, and cases are confirmed in the United States and a number of other countries.

As new information emerges, please remember that *the risk of novel coronavirus is not at all connected with race, ethnicity or nationality*. [Stigma will not help to fight the illness](#). Do not make determinations of risk based on race or country of origin, and be sure to maintain confidentiality of people with confirmed coronavirus infection. Sharing accurate information during a time of heightened concern is one of the best things we can do to keep rumors and misinformation from spreading. The [CDC website](#) is an excellent source of information.

What is a coronavirus?

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that usually cause mild respiratory illnesses such as the common cold. Some coronaviruses have caused more severe illness, such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). SARS-CoV-2 is a new coronavirus that was not identified in humans before December 2019.

What are common symptoms of COVID-19 illness?

Patients with COVID-19 have had mild to severe respiratory illness with symptoms of fever, cough, and shortness of breath. It takes 2 to 14 days after a person gets the virus in their body to become ill. Novel coronavirus is new, and we are learning more each day about symptoms it causes and how long it takes for people to become sick.

How does the virus spread?

Most often, it is spread from person-to-person via respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs or sneezes, similar to how flu and other respiratory pathogens spread. These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs.

It's currently unclear if a person can get COVID-19 by touching a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touching their own mouth, nose, or possibly their eyes. Often, with most respiratory viruses, people are thought to be most contagious when they are most symptomatic (the sickest) but there is some indication of spread by individuals who are not exhibiting typical symptoms.

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Who should seek medical evaluation for COVID-19?

Staff and center members who are:

- Ill with a fever, cough, or difficulty breathing AND have traveled from an affected area in the last 14 days
- Ill with fever, cough, or difficulty breathing AND have been identified by Public Health as a recent close contact of a confirmed COVID-19 case or had recent close contact with someone who is being evaluated for COVID-19 infection.

What should I do if I suspect a staff or center member is at risk for COVID-19?

If someone meets the above criteria, it is important to place them in a private room away from others and ask them to wear a face mask. Immediately notify your [local health department](#). They will provide you with guidance.

Should we recommend that people delay or suspend travel to affected areas?

- Check the CDC's Traveler's Health Notices for the latest guidance and recommendations for each country to which people may travel. This can be found on the [CDC website](#).
- Older individuals and especially those with underlying health conditions can become very ill if they get sick with this virus. They should strongly consider delaying traveling at this time and avoid anyone who is ill with respiratory illness.
- If people do become ill during travel it may be difficult to obtain medical care. They should try to seek an overseas medical assistance company to assist them with finding an appropriate healthcare provider in that country. A U.S. consular officer can help locate healthcare services. However, U.S. embassies, consulates, and military facilities do not have the legal authority, capability, and resources to evacuate or give medicines, vaccines, or medical care to private U.S. citizens and residents overseas.
- Encourage staff and senior center patrons who travel to receive all recommended vaccinations, including influenza. It's not too late to vaccinate.

What can I do to prepare for COVID-19 impacts to our Senior Center? Plan Now!

First consider how best to decrease the spread of respiratory illness and lower the impact of COVID-19 in your center in the event of an outbreak in the community. Objectives should include (a) reducing transmission among staff, (b) protecting people who are at higher risk for adverse health complications, (c) maintaining business operations if indicated, and (d) minimizing effects on other senior support agencies.

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- **Impact of the spread of disease in the community:** Seniors and some employees may be at higher risk for adverse health complications if they contact this virus. It may be recommended that they stay away from public places and gatherings to protect their health. Some seniors may rely on the center for food, warmth and socialization. Closing your doors will have a severe impact on these vulnerable individuals and your staff.
- **Prepare for possible increased numbers of absences** due to illness in employees and their family members, dismissals of early childhood programs and K-12 schools due to high levels of absenteeism or illness. (Refer to the [CDC's guidance](#) for Business planning for the coronavirus).
- **Administrators** with more than one center location are encouraged to provide local managers with the authority to take appropriate actions outlined in their response plan based on the condition in each locality.

What can I do to prevent COVID-19 illnesses at the Senior Center? Implement the Following Strategies Now!

Actively encourage sick employees to stay home and send sick employees home immediately:

- Ensure that your sick leave policies are flexible and consistent with public health guidance and that employees are aware of these policies. Allow for employees to stay home to care for a sick family member.
- Do not require a healthcare provider's note for employees who are sick with acute respiratory illness to validate their illness or to return to work, as healthcare providers may be extremely busy and not able to provide such documentation in a timely way.

Emphasize respiratory etiquette and hand hygiene by everyone

- Place posters that encourage [staying home when sick](#), [cough and sneeze etiquette](#), and [hand hygiene](#) at the entrance to your center and in other areas where they are likely to be seen.
- Provide tissues and no-touch disposal receptacles.
- Ask everyone to clean their hands often with an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60-95% alcohol, or wash their hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. **Soap and water should be used preferentially if hands are visibly dirty.**
- Provide assistance to individuals who may have difficulty washing hands or using a hand rub.
- Advise everyone to avoid touching their eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Provide soap and water and alcohol-based hand rubs in the center. Ensure that adequate supplies are maintained. Place hand rubs in multiple locations to encourage hand hygiene.

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Perform routine environmental cleaning: (for more information, refer to [CDC website](#) for businesses)

- Routinely clean all frequently touched surfaces in the center such as exercise equipment, computers, countertops, and doorknobs. Use the cleaning agents that are usually used in these areas and follow the directions on the label.
- No additional disinfection beyond routine cleaning is recommended at this time.
- Provide disposable wipes so that commonly used surfaces (for example, doorknobs, keyboards, remote controls, desks) can be wiped down by employees before each use

Involve your Administrative staff to assist seniors (who have been recommended to stay home during community transmission of COVID-19) to access other resources:

- **Food & other supplies:** Individuals may need help accessing food/supplies if they are not able to shop for themselves. Meals on Wheels, food banks or store deliveries may need to be arranged to provide sufficient nutrition. Involve available family members or neighbors if necessary.
- **Medications and other medical necessities:** Work with medical providers or social service agencies familiar with the individual to ensure that medications can be delivered to the home. If oxygen is needed, reach out to suppliers to arrange for refills or deliveries. Telehealth services may be available through their insurance carrier. Consider a home assessment for identifying needs with the senior.
- **Social Connections:** Social isolation may be experienced by home-bound seniors who depend on the center to interact with friends and your staff. Consider working with social service agencies to provide telecommunication options including face time and interactive games.
- **Welfare Checks:** Consider contacting service providers such as postal delivery workers, community paramedics or neighborhood watch groups to check on the welfare of home-bound seniors.

Additional COVID-19 Resources

- [DOH Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) webpage](#) – updated information and resources daily
- [Local Health Jurisdictions](#)
- [Workplace and Employers](#)
- [Persons Who are at Higher Risk for Serious Illness](#)
- [Communities and Community Organizations](#)
- [Stigma Reduction](#)
- [How Can I Be Prepared for a COVID-19 Outbreak?](#)
- Washington State Department of Health novel coronavirus call center: 1-800-525-0127 and press #

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