



Center for Clinical Standards and Quality/Quality, Safety & Oversight Group

Ref: QSO-20-14-NH
UPDATE: 03/10/2021

DATE: March 13, 2020

TO: State Survey Agency Directors

FROM: Director
Quality, Safety & Oversight Group

SUBJECT: Guidance for Infection Control and Prevention of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Nursing Homes (**REVISED**)

NOTE: CMS revised guidance on March 10, 2021 for nursing home visitation during the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency, which supersedes the visitation guidance in this memo. See CMS memorandum [QSO-20-39-NH Revised](#), Nursing Home Visitation-COVID-19.

Memorandum Summary

- **CMS is committed** to taking critical steps to ensure America's health care facilities and clinical laboratories are prepared to respond to the threat of the COVID-19.
- **Guidance for Infection Control and Prevention of COVID-19** - CMS is providing additional guidance to nursing homes to help them improve their infection control and prevention practices to prevent the transmission of COVID-19, *including revised guidance for visitation.*
- **Coordination with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and local public health departments** - We encourage all nursing homes to monitor the CDC website for information and resources and contact their local health department when needed (CDC Resources for Health Care Facilities: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/facility-planning-operations.html>).

Background

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) is responsible for ensuring the health and safety of nursing home residents by enforcing the standards required to help each resident attain or maintain their highest level of well-being. In light of the recent spread of COVID-19, we are providing additional guidance to nursing homes to help control and prevent the spread of the virus.

Guidance

Facility staff should regularly monitor the CDC website for information and resources (links below). They should contact their local health department if they have questions or suspect a resident of a nursing home has COVID-19. Per CDC, prompt detection, triage and isolation of potentially infectious residents are essential to prevent unnecessary exposures among residents, healthcare personnel, and visitors at the facility. Therefore, facilities should continue to be vigilant in identifying any possible infected individuals. Facilities should consider frequent monitoring for potential symptoms of respiratory infection as needed throughout the day. Furthermore, we encourage facilities to take advantage of resources that have been made available by CDC and CMS to train and prepare staff to improve infection control and prevention practices. Lastly, facilities should maintain a person-centered approach to care. This includes communicating effectively with residents, resident representatives and/or their family, and understanding their individual needs and goals of care.

Facilities experiencing an increased number of respiratory illnesses (regardless of suspected etiology) among patients/residents or healthcare personnel should immediately contact their local or state health department for further guidance.

In addition to the overarching regulations and guidance, we're providing the following information about some specific areas related to COVID-19:

Guidance for Limiting the Transmission of COVID-19 for Nursing Homes

NOTE: CMS revised guidance on March 10, 2021 for nursing home visitation during the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency which supersedes guidance below related to visitation and communal activities and dining. See [CMS memorandum QSO-20-39-NH Revised](#).

For ALL facilities nationwide:

*Facilities should **restrict** visitation of **all** visitors and non-essential health care personnel, except for certain compassionate care situations, such as an end-of-life situation. In those cases, visitors will be limited to a specific room only. Facilities are expected to notify potential visitors to defer visitation until further notice (through signage, calls, letters, etc.). Note: If a state implements actions that exceed CMS requirements, such as a ban on all visitation through a governor's executive order, a facility would not be out of compliance with CMS' requirements. In this case, surveyors would still enter the facility, but not cite for noncompliance with visitation requirements.*

For individuals that enter in compassionate situations (e.g., end-of-life care), facilities should require visitors to perform hand hygiene and use Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), such as facemasks. Decisions about visitation during an end of life situation should be made on a case by case basis, which should include careful screening of the visitor (including clergy, bereavement counselors, etc.) for fever or respiratory symptoms. Those with symptoms of a respiratory infection (fever, cough, shortness of breath, or sore throat) should not be permitted to enter the facility at any time (even in end-of-life situations). Those visitors that are permitted, must wear a facemask while in the building and restrict their visit to the resident's room or other location designated by the facility. They should also be reminded to frequently perform hand hygiene.

Exceptions to restrictions:

- *Health care workers: Facilities should follow CDC guidelines for restricting access to health care workers found at <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/guidance-risk-assesment-hcp.html>.*
- *This also applies to other health care workers, such as hospice workers, EMS personnel, or dialysis technicians, that provide care to residents. They should be permitted to come into the facility as long as they meet the CDC guidelines for health care workers. Facilities should contact their local health department for questions, and frequently review the CDC website dedicated to COVID-19 for health care professionals (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/index.html>).*
- *Surveyors: CMS and state survey agencies are constantly evaluating their surveyors to ensure they don't pose a transmission risk when entering a facility. For example, surveyors may have been in a facility with COVID-19 cases in the previous 14 days, but because they were wearing PPE effectively per CDC guidelines, they pose a low risk to transmission in the next facility, and must be allowed to enter. However, there are circumstances under which surveyors should still not enter, such as if they have a fever.*

Additional guidance:

1. *Cancel communal dining and all group activities, such as internal and external group activities.*
2. *Implement active screening of residents and staff for fever and respiratory symptoms.*
3. *Remind residents to practice social distancing and perform frequent hand hygiene.*
4. *Screen all staff at the beginning of their shift for fever and respiratory symptoms. Actively take their temperature and document absence of shortness of breath, new or change in cough, and sore throat. If they are ill, have them put on a facemask and self-isolate at home.*
5. *For individuals allowed in the facility (e.g., in end-of-life situations), provide instruction, before visitors enter the facility and residents' rooms, provide instruction on hand hygiene, limiting surfaces touched, and use of PPE according to current facility policy while in the resident's room. Individuals with fevers, other symptoms of COVID-19, or unable to demonstrate proper use of infection control techniques should be restricted from entry. Facilities should communicate through multiple means to inform individuals and nonessential health care personnel of the visitation restrictions, such as through signage at entrances/exits, letters, emails, phone calls, and recorded messages for receiving calls.*
6. *Facilities should identify staff that work at multiple facilities (e.g., agency staff, regional or corporate staff, etc.) and actively screen and restrict them appropriately to ensure they do not place individuals in the facility at risk for COVID-19.*
7. *Facilities should review and revise how they interact vendors and receiving supplies, agency staff, EMS personnel and equipment, transportation providers (e.g., when taking residents to offsite appointments, etc.), and other non-health care providers (e.g., food delivery, etc.), and take necessary actions to prevent any potential transmission. For example, do not have supply vendors transport supplies inside the facility. Have them dropped off at a dedicated location (e.g., loading dock). Facilities can allow entry of these visitors if needed, as long as they are following the appropriate CDC guidelines for Transmission-Based Precautions.*
8. *In lieu of visits, facilities should consider:*
 - a) *Offering alternative means of communication for people who would otherwise visit, such as virtual communications (phone, video-communication, etc.).*
 - b) *Creating/increasing listserv communication to update families, such as advising to not visit.*
 - c) *Assigning staff as primary contact to families for inbound calls, and conduct regular outbound calls to keep families up to date.*

- d) *Offering a phone line with a voice recording updated at set times (e.g., daily) with the facility's general operating status, such as when it is safe to resume visits.*
- 9. *When visitation is necessary or allowable (e.g., in end-of-life scenarios), facilities should make efforts to allow for safe visitation for residents and loved ones. For example:*
 - a) *Suggest refraining from physical contact with residents and others while in the facility. For example, practice social distances with no hand-shaking or hugging, and remaining six feet apart.*
 - b) *If possible (e.g., pending design of building), creating dedicated visiting areas (e.g., "clean rooms") near the entrance to the facility where residents can meet with visitors in a sanitized environment. Facilities should disinfect rooms after each resident-visitor meeting.*
 - c) *Residents still have the right to access the Ombudsman program. Their access should be restricted per the guidance above (except in compassionate care situations), however, facilities may review this on a case by case basis. If in-person access is not available due to infection control concerns, facilities need to facilitate resident communication (by phone or other format) with the Ombudsman program or any other entity listed in 42 CFR § 483.10(f)(4)(i).*
- 10. *Advise visitors, and any individuals who entered the facility (e.g., hospice staff), to monitor for signs and symptoms of respiratory infection for at least 14 days after exiting the facility. If symptoms occur, advise them to self-isolate at home, contact their healthcare provider, and immediately notify the facility of the date they were in the facility, the individuals they were in contact with, and the locations within the facility they visited. Facilities should immediately screen the individuals of reported contact, and take all necessary actions based on findings.*

When should nursing homes consider transferring a resident with suspected or confirmed infection with COVID-19 to a hospital?

Nursing homes with residents suspected of having COVID-19 infection should contact their local health department. Residents infected with COVID-19 may vary in severity from lack of symptoms to mild or severe symptoms or fatality. Initially, symptoms may be mild and not require transfer to a hospital as long as the facility can follow the infection prevention and control practices recommended by CDC. Facilities without an airborne infection isolation room (AIIR) are not required to transfer the resident assuming: 1) the resident does not require a higher level of care and 2) the facility can adhere to the rest of the infection prevention and control practices recommended for caring for a resident with COVID-19.

Please check the following link regularly for critical updates, such as updates to guidance for using PPE: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/infectioncontrol/controlrecommendations.html>.

The resident may develop more severe symptoms and require transfer to a hospital for a higher level of care. Prior to transfer, emergency medical services and the receiving facility should be alerted to the resident's diagnosis, and precautions to be taken including placing a facemask on the resident during transfer. If the resident does not require hospitalization they can be discharged to home (in consultation with state or local public health authorities) if deemed medically and socially [appropriate](#). Pending transfer or discharge, place a facemask on the resident and isolate him/her in a room with the door closed.

When should a nursing home accept a resident who was diagnosed with COVID-19 from a hospital?

A nursing home can accept a resident diagnosed with COVID-19 and still under Transmission-Based Precautions for COVID-19 as long as the facility can follow CDC guidance for Transmission-Based Precautions. If a nursing home cannot, it must wait until these precautions are discontinued. CDC has released [Interim Guidance for Discontinuing Transmission-Based](#)

Precautions or In-Home Isolation for Persons with Laboratory-confirmed COVID-19.

Information on the duration of infectivity is limited, and the interim guidance has been developed with available information from similar coronaviruses. CDC states that decisions to discontinue Transmission-based Precautions in hospitals will be made on a case-by-case basis in consultation with clinicians, infection prevention and control specialists, and public health officials. Discontinuation will be based on multiple factors (see current CDC guidance for further details).

Note: Nursing homes should admit any individuals that they would normally admit to their facility, including individuals from hospitals where a case of COVID-19 was/is present. Also, if possible, dedicate a unit/wing exclusively for any residents coming or returning from the hospital. This can serve as a step-down unit where they remain for 14 days with no symptoms (instead of integrating as usual on short-term rehab floor, or returning to longstay original room).

Other considerations for facilities:

- Review CDC guidance for Infection Prevention and Control Recommendations for Patients with Confirmed Coronavirus Disease 2019: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/infectioncontrol/controlrecommendations.html>
- Increase the availability and accessibility of alcohol-based hand rubs (ABHRs), *reinforce strong hand-hygiene practices*, tissues, no touch receptacles for disposal, and facemasks at healthcare facility entrances, waiting rooms, resident check-ins, etc.
 - Ensure ABHR is accessible in all resident-care areas including inside and outside resident rooms.
- Increase signage for vigilant infection prevention, such as hand hygiene and cough etiquette.
- Properly clean, disinfect and limit sharing of medical equipment between residents and areas of the facility.
- Provide additional work supplies to avoid sharing (e.g., pens, pads) and disinfect workplace areas (nurse's stations, phones, internal radios, etc.).

Will nursing homes be cited for not having the appropriate supplies?

CMS is aware of that there is a scarcity of some supplies in certain areas of the country. State and Federal surveyors should not cite facilities for not having certain supplies (e.g., PPE such as gowns, N95 respirators, surgical masks and ABHR) if they are having difficulty obtaining these supplies for reasons outside of their control. However, we do expect facilities to take actions to mitigate any resource shortages and show they are taking all appropriate steps to obtain the necessary supplies as soon as possible. For example, if there is a shortage of ABHR, we expect staff to practice effective hand washing with soap and water. Similarly, if there is a shortage of PPE (e.g., due to supplier(s) shortage which may be a regional or national issue), the facility should contact the local and state public health agency to notify them of the shortage, follow national guidelines for optimizing their current supply, or identify the next best option to care for residents. If a surveyor believes a facility should be cited for not having or providing the necessary supplies, the state agency should contact the CMS Branch Office.

What other resources are available for facilities to help improve infection control and prevention?

CMS urges providers to take advantage of several resources that are available:

CDC Resources:

- Infection preventionist training: <https://www.cdc.gov/longtermcare/index.html> • CDC Resources for Health Care Facilities: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019ncov/healthcare-facilities/index.html>
- CDC Updates: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/whats-new-all.html>
- CDC FAQ for COVID-19: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019ncov/infectioncontrol/infection-prevention-control-faq.html>
- Information on affected US locations: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019ncov/casesin-us.html>

CMS Resources:

- **Guidance for use of Certain Industrial Respirators by Health Care Personnel:** <https://www.cms.gov/files/document/qso-20-17-all.pdf>
- Long term care facility – Infection control self-assessment worksheet: https://qsep.cms.gov/data/252/A_NursingHome_InfectionControl_Worksheet11819508.pdf
- Infection control toolkit for bedside licensed nurses and nurse aides (“Head to Toe Infection Prevention (H2T) Toolkit”): <https://www.cms.gov/Medicare/Provider-Enrollment-and-Certification/SurveyCertificationGenInfo/LTC-CMP-Reinvestment>
- Infection Control and Prevention regulations and guidance: 42 CFR 483.80, Appendix PP of the State Operations Manual. See F-tag 880: <https://www.cms.gov/Medicare/ProviderEnrollment-and-Certification/GuidanceforLawsAndRegulations/Downloads/AppendixPP-StateOperations-Manual.pdf>

Contact: Email DNH_TriageTeam@cms.hhs.gov

NOTE: The situation regarding COVID-19 is still evolving worldwide and can change rapidly. Stakeholders should be prepared for guidance from CMS and other agencies (e.g., CDC) to change. Please monitor the relevant sources regularly for updates.

Effective Date: Immediately. This policy should be communicated with all survey and certification staff, their managers and the State/Regional Office training coordinators immediately.

/s/

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cc: Survey and Operations Group Management