

What Older Adults Need to Know About the Coronavirus

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March 27, 2020

According to U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), adults who are 65 years old and older are at a higher risk for severe illness and hospitalization from COVID-19 infection. If you're an older adult or caring for someone who is elderly, learn what you can do to help prevent illness from COVID-19.

Why are Older Adults at Higher Risk for Severe Illness from COVID-19?

The CDC's data suggests that older adults are twice as likely as other adults to have a serious COVID-19 infection. This is most likely because many elderly people:

- Have weaker immune systems, making it harder for them to fight an infection
- Have underlying health conditions (heart disease, diabetes, asthma, etc.) that can make it harder to cope with an infection
- Have a less resilient respiratory system compared to younger people, even if they don't have a preexisting health condition

“Even very healthy adults in their 70s and 80s can be at risk for COVID-19, because they still have age-related changes to their immune system that can make them susceptible to the worst form of this disease,” says [Houman Javedan, MD](#), a geriatrician and clinical director of the [Division of Aging](#) at Brigham and Women's Hospital.

What Steps Can Older Adults Take to Prevent Getting Sick?

The most important thing older adults can do to prevent illness is to avoid exposure to the coronavirus that causes COVID-19. This means staying home as much as possible and only leaving your home for essential activities that may include:

- Appointments with health care providers (call ahead to see if your doctor can talk over the phone or do a [virtual care visit](#) by computer)
- Visits to the pharmacy (consider using a mail order pharmacy)
- Shopping for groceries or supplies (many stores have special hours for seniors, and consider buying food using grocery delivery services)
- Reschedule travel plans, especially if your trip involves traveling by airplane or cruise ship. Carriers may offer a refund or travel credit.

“If you're older and must leave your home, make sure to stay at least 6 feet away from people. Since it's difficult to maintain this distance even in waiting rooms, grocery stores and pharmacies, ask a family member, friend or neighbor to help you shop for groceries or

pick up your medicine at the pharmacy,” says Dr. Javedan.

What Should Older Adults Do if They Must Leave Their Home?

If you are elderly and decide to leave your home, you can protect yourself from COVID-19 by taking these steps:

- Limit close contact with others by staying 6 feet apart.
- Avoid large gatherings and public spaces.
- Avoid public transportation and ridesharing services.

How Can You Prevent COVID-19 Infection?

To make sure you're not exposed to droplets that contain the coronavirus, follow these tips:

- Wash your hands for at least 20 seconds after sneezing or coughing. If soap and water aren't available, use alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60 percent alcohol.
- When you cough or sneeze, cover your mouth and nose with a tissue. If you don't have one handy, cough or sneeze into your elbow.
- Clean and disinfect surfaces you touch frequently, including phones, remote controls, counters and doorknobs.
- Avoid touching your face with unwashed hands.
- If you receive a package, wash your hands after handling the package.

“If you're older, you can still have visitors, just try to keep a distance and avoid having visitors enter your house, if you can. I live next door to my parents and I don't go into their house. We see each other twice a day by video chat or I will stand in the driveway and talk through an open window, making sure to stay 6 feet away. When I bring them groceries or medications, I leave them at the doorstep without opening the door. The hardest part is that I haven't touched them or hugged them in the past few weeks, just in case I've been infected and don't have symptoms,” says Dr. Javedan.

How Can Older Adults be Proactive About Their Health?

Make a plan in case you get sick. This includes taking the following proactive steps:

- Identify a back-up caregiver in case your caregiver gets sick.
- Contact your health care provider and make sure you have an adequate supply of medications (at 2 weeks, though request a 90-day supply).
- Stock up on supplies, including groceries and household items.

How Can You Support Older Adults in Your Life?

Here are ways that family, friends and neighbors can help protect the older adults in their lives:

- Help them minimize trips to stores by stocking up on non-perishable food items that last a long time without spoiling, such as canned beans, nuts, grains, granola and protein bars.
- Know what medications your loved one is taking and help make sure they have extra on hand. Consider ordering medications through a mail-order pharmacy service.
- Help clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces. See tips from the [CDC](#).
- Monitor medical supplies, including oxygen, tissues, etc.

“By having to rely on others, many older adults may think that they are a burden. It’s important to have conversations that help dispel the myth that asking for help is a nuisance—it isn’t! To keep the elderly in our lives from being exposed, we need to go out of our way to make sure they’re protected,” says Dr. Javedan.

How Can You Stay Connected with Elderly People in Your Life?

While practicing “social distancing” (maintaining approximately 6 feet of distance from others) is one of the most important interventions older adults can do to stay healthy, it’s important to find ways to stay connected.

Here’s how you can stay connected without being in the same space at the same time:

- Call frequently.
- Check in through text, email or social media platforms.
- Send a handwritten card or flowers through the mail.
- Watch the same movie at the same time and talk about it afterward.
- Send a care package with books to keep the older person in your life engaged.
- Learn a new skill together remotely, like cooking, crafting or a foreign language.

“Social isolation is much harder for the elderly compared to the young, so schedule regular check-ins, even video chatting over lunch is hugely helpful,” says Dr. Javedan.

If you’re older and feeling isolated, the Institute on Aging offers a free, 24/7 [Friendship Line](#) that you can reach out to for a friendly voice.

What Should Older Adults Do if They Are Sick with COVID-19?

If you’re sick, or think you may be sick with COVID-19, stay home and call your health care provider unless you experience a worsening fever, cough or shortness of breath.

If you develop any of the following more serious symptoms, call the Emergency Department or 911 and tell them you have or may have COVID-19.

- Trouble breathing
- Pain that doesn't go away or pressure in your chest.
- Confusion, or blueness of the lips or face

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