



Respiratory viruses and residential aged care: what residents need to know

You can catch respiratory viruses like COVID-19, influenza (the flu) and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) at any time of the year, although flu and RSV are much more common in winter. COVID-19 also has peaks at other times. This factsheet explains the measures to help keep you safe in residential aged care.

Things to remember

- There are many benefits to staying in residential care, including getting the most appropriate care for your day-to-day needs, having carers available day and night, and having access to activities to support your social, mental, and physical wellbeing.
- Aged care providers have the knowledge and experience to minimise the risk of any infections, while also meeting your needs. There are national standards in place to help them do this.
- Older people can be more at risk of complications if they stay in hospital for a long time, so getting back to your aged care facility as soon as appropriate is always a good idea.

How to stop viruses spreading

- Viruses can enter an aged care facility with a visitor or staff member who is unwell, or a resident who has been out and about. It can be difficult to avoid contact with someone who is sick, but it's important that visitors stay away if they are unwell or have tested positive for a respiratory virus.
- Respiratory viruses can spread through the air or through contact with contaminated objects and surfaces. It's important for you and your visitors to frequently wash your hands or use an alcohol-based hand sanitiser, and to cover your coughs and sneezes. You can also wear a surgical mask if you have, or think you have, a virus. Keeping 1.5 metres or 2 arms' lengths away from people will also help reduce the spread of any virus.

How your carers will respond

- Your aged care facility can declare an 'outbreak' of COVID-19, influenza, or RSV when only 2 residents have the infection. This means the risk to others may still be very low, as the residents who are sick will probably stay within one area, usually their own rooms.
- If you're a new or returning resident from the community or hospital, you'll still be able to enter the facility if there is an outbreak.
- Your aged care facility will act quickly to minimise the risk to you, which might include:
 - identifying people who are unwell, and keeping them separate from other residents
 - testing unwell residents to confirm what virus they have
 - providing care and treatment for unwell residents, including medication if needed – antivirals work best if taken as soon as possible after getting sick
 - staff wearing protective gear such as masks, eye protection, gowns and gloves, cleaning more frequently, putting up signs, and providing alcohol-based hand sanitiser

- labelling different areas in the facility as low or high-risk zones
- restricting the number of visitors, testing them or asking them to wear masks
- observing contacts of cases for signs of illness to facilitate testing and early access to treatment
- encouraging residents to stay in their own room, or in certain areas of the facility.

When to get vaccinated

Keeping up to date with recommended vaccinations and booster doses is the best way to stay healthy and well. Aged care providers will make sure that residents are offered government-funded COVID-19 and flu vaccinations. If you or your family have any questions or concerns about a vaccination, you can speak to your GP or facility nurse manager.

For COVID-19, vaccination is recommended:

- every 6 months for all adults over 75 years of age
- every 12 months for all adults aged 65 to 74 years, but you can consider a dose every 6 months based on your individual health needs.

If you are unsure when you last had a COVID-19 vaccine or infection, it is safe to get vaccinated.

The flu vaccine is recommended for all residents and staff, regardless of age, every 12 months.

The RSV vaccine is available to adults 60 years or older as a private purchase – speak to your GP about the benefits and cost of this vaccine.

Where to find out more

Speak to your GP or facility nurse manager, or visit healthywa.wa.gov.au

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