



Fact sheet: for older Australians on COVID-19

20 March 2020

This Fact Sheet is for the information and advice of older Australians. It outlines the COVID-19 facts and the measures you, your family and friends can take to protect older Australians. The spread of COVID-19 and Australia's response is evolving.

We will provide updated versions of this Fact Sheet when new information comes to hand at www.health.gov.au.

Older people (60+ years of age, or 50+ for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples) are more susceptible to getting sick with COVID-19 (coronavirus). The risk of serious illness, and in some reported cases death, increases with age, particularly those who have chronic illnesses or who may have a weakened immune system.

What is COVID-19 (coronavirus)?

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that cause respiratory infections. These can range from the common cold to more serious diseases. COVID-19 is the disease caused by a new coronavirus. It was first reported in December 2019 in Wuhan City in China. It has now become a global pandemic.

How is it spread?

The virus can spread from person to person through:

- close contact with an infectious person (including in the 24 hours before they started showing symptoms)
- contact with droplets from an infected person coughing or sneezing
- touching objects or surfaces (like doorknobs or tables) that have droplets on them from an infected person, and then touching your mouth or face.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of COVID-19 are similar to colds and flus and can include:

- Fever
- Sore throat
- Cough
- Shortness of breath
- Fatigue

While the COVID-19 virus is of serious concern, it is important to remember, at this stage, that most people displaying symptoms such as fever, cough, sore throat or fatigue may be suffering from a cold, flu, allergies or other respiratory illness – not COVID-19.

Do I need to be tested if I have those symptoms?

If you develop symptoms within 14 days of last contact with a confirmed COVID-19 case or returning to Australia, you should seek medical attention. Your doctor will tell you if you need to get tested.

There is a global shortage of test kits, so the medical advice to date is to limit testing and target it towards people who may have been exposed to virus.

Why is this virus so dangerous for older people?

The risk of serious illness from COVID-19 increases with age. The highest rate of fatalities is among older people, particularly those with other serious health conditions or a weakened immune system. There is currently no cure or vaccine for COVID-19, or immunity in the community.

For people living with dementia or some form of cognitive impairment, the ability to follow instruction or to alert others about potential symptoms may be a challenge. This is especially so where there is a limited capacity to communicate verbally or express pain and discomfort. In this situation, observation by someone who knows the person with dementia may assist in identifying changes in their health.

To protect older Australians and those with compromised immune systems we all need to work together to help stop the spread of COVID-19.

I am an older person, what can I do?

Even if you are feeling well it is important to take steps to prevent the spread of this virus. Good hygiene and taking care when interacting with other people, are the best defences for you and your family against COVID-19. This includes:

- covering your coughs and sneezes with your elbow or a tissue
- disposing of tissues immediately they are used, into a dedicated waste bin and washing your hands
- washing your hands often with soap and water, including before and after eating and after going to the toilet, and when you have been out to shops or other places
- using alcohol-based hand sanitisers, where available
- cleaning and disinfecting surfaces you have touched
- where possible, stay 1.5 metres away from other people an example of “social distancing”
- if you are sick, avoiding contact with others.

If you start to feel unwell, phone the National Coronavirus Helpline on 1800 020 080 or your GP who will be able to provide you with further advice. Older people aged 70+ (or 50+ for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people) or people with chronic conditions are able to seek medical support from their GPs through bulk-billed telehealth (videolink) and telephone services. Examples of possible video applications include FaceTime and Skype. Medical practitioners must be satisfied that the services they use to video link with their patients meet current standards and laws regarding privacy and information security.

Can I go to the shops or catch the bus, or should I stay in my own home?

All Australians are being asked to practise “social distancing”, including staying 1.5 metres away from other people where possible. Only people diagnosed with, or exposed to, COVID-19 and those returning from overseas are required to self-isolate in their homes.

Are other vaccinations important?

It is very important that you reduce your risk of getting other illnesses while COVID-19 remains in our community. There is no vaccine for COVID-19. However, it is important that you get the 2020 flu vaccination as soon as it is available from your GP or pharmacy.

Discuss with your doctor whether you should have a pneumococcal vaccination against pneumonia, which is recommended for everyone over 65. You should also discuss having a shingles vaccination.

What if I need urgent assistance that cannot be provided by my current carer?

Older Australians can access short term home support services (such as meals or personal care) in an emergency without having had an aged care assessment. Assessments can also be conducted using telehealth rather than face-to-face where appropriate, speak with a home care provider about these measures.

I have a Home Care Package - what does this mean for me?

Consumers with Home Care Packages have flexibility with how they spend their funds over a wide range of care and services to support to stay safe, healthy and independent in their home.

The Australian Government will ensure home care providers have even greater support to meet the changing needs of clients as the virus unfolds.

With support from the Australian Government, home care providers are working hard to meet people’s needs during the crisis.

The services you currently receive through your Home Care Package will continue. However, there may be some changes to the way service is delivered. For example, home care staff may change the way that personal care is done to limit person-to-person touch where possible, or wear masks and gloves where they may not have previously.

If you are concerned about the way your current services are being delivered or would like to make changes to your services because of the COVID-19 outbreak, please contact your provider. You can also speak with your provider about changes to your usual services, such as arranging help to go to the shops or arranging your carer to shop on your behalf.

What happens if I've spent all the money in my Home Care Package this month?

In emergency situations, if an older Australian has fully allocated their Home Care Package, they may access short term home support services (for a range of services including nursing, personal care and meals). Speak with your home care provider about these measures.

I need additional medical / health services – where can I go?

As part of the COVID-19 National Health Plan the Australian Government has increased access to bulk billed MBS telehealth and telephone services and fast tracked electronic prescribing of medicines.

The Australian Government's Telehealth scheme allows doctors, nurses and mental health professionals to deliver services via telehealth (video link) or by telephone, provided those services are bulk billed, to those people who are 70+ years of age (or 50+ for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people); people self-isolating at home; or those with chronic health conditions or are immunocompromised.

Patients are encouraged to contact their health service providers to ask about the availability of telehealth and telephone services. Examples of possible video applications include FaceTime and Skype, noting that medical practitioners must be satisfied that their chosen options for telehealth and telephone services meet current standards and laws regarding privacy and information security.

The Australian Government is creating measures to allow prescriptions remotely and have their medicines home delivered to reduce their potential exposure to COVID-19. This measure complements the expanded use of telehealth under Medicare, and is available to those people who are 70+ years of age (or 50+ for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people); people self-isolating at home; or those with chronic health conditions or are immunocompromised.

The Australian Government will fast track the implementation of electronic prescribing (ePrescribing) to help protect people most at-risk in our community from exposure to COVID-19. This will allow a doctor to prepare an electronic prescription that patients will then be able to electronically share with their pharmacy, where the pharmacy is able to support the home delivery of medicines.

More information on the COVID-19 National Health Plan is available at <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-national-health-plan-resources>

Can I still have contact with friends and family?

The Australian Government is advising everyone to practise “social distancing”, which means less contact between you and other people to help slow the spread of the disease. If you are an older person (60+ years of age), you should consider limiting physical contact with other people, especially young children, and avoiding large groups of people. You may wish to limit your visitors to one or two people per day, and limit the duration of visits. This will help protect you and help stop the spread of disease.

It's possible that children and young people may be carriers of COVID-19 but show no symptoms, making it extremely difficult to tell if it's safe for them to visit an older relative.

These measures may be stressful for you and your loved ones. A chat over the phone, video call or email - rather than visits in person – is a good precaution and could help stop the spread of COVID-19.

Should I continue to visit older friends and relatives?

It is important to keep up-to-date with and follow Australian Government advice. For the latest advice and information go to www.health.gov.au.

If visiting older family and friends is not possible, keep in touch via phone and video calls, send postcards, photos or artwork, or film short videos to share. This will limit your exposure to COVID-19 and your chances of accidentally spreading it to other older people in your life.

If you regularly visit someone living with a cognitive impairment, considering other ways of maintaining social contact will help reassure individuals who may feel anxious about possible changes to their day to day life. You can also contact the National Dementia Helpline on 1800 100 500.

If you have returned from overseas after 15 March, been in close contact with a confirmed case of coronavirus, or you have coronavirus yourself, you must self-isolate for 14 days. You can't visit people and they can't visit you, but you can stay in touch by phone, video call or online.

Should I visit my family and friends in a residential aged care facility?

To protect our most vulnerable people, the Australian Government announced restrictions on visits to all residential aged care facilities. If you do visit, the aged care home will have strict procedures you will need to respect and follow. These restrictions are available here: <https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-for-public-gatherings-and-visits-to-vulnerable-groups>.

Some aged care providers are asking all visitors not to visit centres in order to protect the older people living in the facility. In these cases, there is usually a process the provider has in place for exceptions, such as when a loved one is very unwell or in a palliative stage. Call the facility to understand what processes are in place. If you have concerns with the centre's actions, contact the Older Person's Advocacy Network on 1800 700 600 or the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission on 1800 951 822.

If you are not able to visit consider other ways to stay in touch, including phone and video calls, writing, or filming short videos to share.

How can your family and friends help you and other older people?

Regularly check in with older friends or relatives, and see how you might help. A simple trip to the supermarket or pharmacy on their behalf is a practical way to help older people who may not be able to go on their own.

Continued and regular communication will be important. Assist older people to keep in communication with friends and family by enabling them to use mobile phones, video call systems such as Skype or FaceTime.

If you are regularly in contact with a person living with dementia, maintaining that routine as much as possible is important. If events or activities are cancelled try to provide alternative engagement within the home. There are many activity ideas on Dementia Australia's website, available here www.dementia.org.au.

Should I be wearing a mask?

Only people who have a confirmed case of COVID-19 are required to wear surgical masks, and only when you are around other people. If you are well, you do not need to wear a surgical mask.

Specific requirements are in place for people who have returned from overseas, or have been in close contact with a confirmed case of coronavirus.

If you are required to self-isolate, you should use a surgical mask (if you have one) in the following circumstances:

- You need to leave your home for any reason and will be in public areas
- You are visiting a medical facility
- You have symptoms and other people are present in the same room as you.

Can I get help if I can't buy things at my local shops?

Some supermarkets have special arrangements for older people. Please contact your local supermarket directly for more information. For more advice on grocery shopping, please visit www.cota.org.au/covid19.

I received an email/SMS/phone call about COVID-19 from someone I don't trust – is it a scam?

Unfortunately, there have been multiple reports of scams related to COVID-19. For the most accurate and up-to-date information on COVID-19, please rely on Australian Government material such as this fact sheet.

If you receive communication that you think may be a scam, delete the messages. Do not open any attachments, and do not click on any links. If you think someone may have accessed your financial information, contact your bank immediately.

For the most up-to-date information on scams in Australia, please visit www.staysmartonline.gov.au or call 1300 292 371.

I have tickets to an event, or upcoming holiday. What should I do next?

If you have purchased tickets to a cancelled event, you will receive a refund or other remedy. If your event has not been cancelled, but you choose not to attend due to COVID-19, you may not be eligible for a refund. For more information, please go to www.accc.gov.au/consumers/consumer-rights-guarantees/covid-19-coronavirus-information-for-consumers.

If you have an overseas holiday planned, the Australian Government has raised the advice for all overseas travel to the highest level. The Australian Government's advice to all Australians - regardless of destination, age or health - is do not travel overseas at this time. For more information, visit www.smarttraveller.gov.au/crisis/covid-19-and-travel.

If you have a domestic holiday planned, you should approach your travel or accommodation provider to see what arrangements are in place. You should first approach the provider of the related service to see if they are prepared to offer a refund, replacements service or voucher. If your travel is cancelled the ACCC expects that you will receive a refund or other remedy, such as a credit note or voucher, in most circumstances. For more information, please go to www.accc.gov.au/consumers/consumer-rights-guarantees/covid-19-coronavirus-information-for-consumers.

More information

For the latest advice, information and resources, go to www.health.gov.au or www.healthdirect.gov.au/coronavirus. The phone number of your state or territory public health agency is available at www.health.gov.au/state-territory-contacts.

Call the National Coronavirus Help Line on 1800 020 080. It operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If you require translating or interpreting services, call 131 450.

For further information please contact:

- COTA at www.cota.org.au/covid-19, or speak to your state or territory COTA representative www.cota.org.au/get-involved/visit-stateor-territory-cota
- National Seniors Australia at <https://nationalseniors.com.au/news/latest/coronavirus-national-seniors-ceo-update> or call 1300 765 050
- OPAN at www.opan.com.au, or call 1800 700 600
- Dementia Australia at www.dementia.org.au or call 1800 100 500.

For further information from COTA visit www.cota.org.au/covid-19, or speak to your state or territory COTA representative www.cota.org.au/get-involved/visit-stateor-territory-cota.

If you have concerns about your health, speak to your doctor.