

Infection Prevention and You



How to be a good visitor at a nursing home

You all know the feeling. You wake up with a scratchy throat, a headache, a cough, or you might be feeling a bit achy, or feel like you have “just a touch of a cold.” Your stomach may be upset or you may be making frequent bathroom stops. But you had planned to visit your loved one at a long-term care facility (also known as a nursing home), and you know he/she has been looking forward to your visit.

These can be symptoms of many things, but they might be symptoms of respiratory or gastrointestinal illnesses that can spread quickly and infect a long-term care facility’s residents, patients, families, and staff.

What to do?

The basic principles of infection prevention apply to being a good visitor.

Stay home and do not visit your loved one if you are sick or have had any ill symptoms within the last three days— including nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, fever (or feeling feverish), an uncontrolled cough, or a rash.

Wash or sanitize your hands frequently—before and after visiting your loved one. Insist that other visitors do the same. Clean your hands after touching your eyes, nose, or mouth, after using the restroom, and before and after eating or drinking. Cover your cough or sneeze with your sleeve, and do not sit on the resident’s bed or handle the equipment. Also be sure to help residents with hand hygiene before eating and after going to the bathroom.

Don’t contribute to the clutter and ask if you can help clean and disinfect high-touch surfaces frequently (every one to two hours). High-touch surfaces include door knobs, toilet handles, bedside trays, and many others.

Wear surgical masks if requested by staff. Remove the masks when leaving patient/resident care areas, and if you touch the mask, replace it.

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Recognize if you're coming down with an illness. Be honest about how you feel, and realize if you are coming down with a respiratory illness, you are MORE contagious during the first 24-48 hours than you are at the end of the illness, after your immune system has a chance to fight the illness.

Gastrointestinal illness (stomach “bugs”) caused by viruses can spread like wildfire through long-term care communities. Norovirus, the most common cause of gastrointestinal illness, causes severe and prolonged nausea, vomiting, and diarrhea. Although some people may call this type of illness the “stomach flu,” it is NOT the flu.

The flu (or influenza) can cause severe illness and sometimes death in long-term care residents—symptoms usually come on suddenly and include fever, chills, body aches, headaches, tiredness, and runny/stuffy nose. Remember to get your flu shot each year. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends that everyone over the age of 6 months receive flu shots each and every year.

Human Metapneumovirus can cause everything from the usual cold symptoms to pneumonia. It spreads when someone coughs or sneezes and has contact with others.

Adenovirus causes symptoms can look like a cold in a healthy adult; however, this virus can cause pneumonia and death in older adults and very young children. It spreads when someone coughs or sneezes and has contact with others.

Respiratory Syncytial Virus causes severe influenza-like illness in older adults and young children. It spreads when someone coughs or sneezes and has contact with others.

Lastly, be sure to use common sense before and during your visits with loved ones.

Thank you for your support of family and friends.

Additional Resources

CDC – Infection prevention in long-term care <http://www.cdc.gov/longtermcare/>

CDC – Respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) <http://www.cdc.gov/rsv/>

CDC – Viral gastroenteritis <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/revb/gastro/faq.htm>

American Lung Association – Human metapneumovirus <http://www.lung.org/lung-disease/human-metapneumovirus/>

Flu.gov – Who's at risk? <http://www.flu.gov/at-risk/seniors/index.html>

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