

COVID-19: Guidance and advice for communities and older people's associations



COVID-19 poses serious challenges for all of us, but there are things we can do, as communities, to support each other. This guidance provides advice to community members and groups on how they can understand and map their communities, measures they can take to support social engagement and avoid isolation, what can be done to ensure older people have access to basic supplies and what to do if an older person is unwell with suspected COVID-19.

In these challenging times it is important that communities come together, to support each other, to maintain social cohesion and to ensure those most at risk are cared for.

This guidance is aimed at community members and community groups, including older people's associations (OPAs), on how to keep older people safe and well during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

What is COVID-19 and how is it spread?

- COVID-19 or 'coronavirus' is a new disease that emerged in 2019 and causes respiratory infection.
- The most common symptoms of COVID-19 are fever, a dry cough and shortage of breath. Some people may have aches and pains, a runny nose, sore throat or diarrhoea.

- Some people become infected but don't develop any symptoms and don't feel unwell.
- Most people (about 80%) recover from COVID-19 without needing special treatment.
- Around one in six people will become more seriously unwell and will develop difficulty breathing.
- We are all at risk of acquiring COVID-19, but older people, and those with underlying health problems like high blood pressure, heart problems or diabetes, are more likely to become seriously unwell with COVID-19, and are more likely to die.
- People with fever, cough and difficulty breathing should seek medical help.
- People can catch COVID-19 from others who have the virus, whether or not they have symptoms.
- The disease can spread from person to person through small droplets from the nose or mouth. These are spread when a person with the virus coughs or sneezes. Research suggests the virus can live for some time on surfaces, like tables and door handles.

Responses to COVID-19

As COVID-19 cases emerge around the world, governments are putting in place measures to try and prevent the spread of the virus and to minimise the risks for those most vulnerable. These measures include physical distancing, self-isolation and quarantine.

- 1. Physical distancing:** also being referred to as 'social distancing' this is about trying to maintain some physical distance from other people to reduce rates of infection. Ways of doing this include avoiding crowded places and big groups of people; public transport; physical contact with others, including greetings like shaking hands or hugging; and school and business closures.
- 2. Self-isolation:** staying indoors as much as possible and trying to avoid contact with other people. You should only go outside your home if it's essential, for example to buy food and medicines.
- 3. Quarantine:** being fully separated from other people. Quarantine is necessary when someone has COVID-19 and is more seriously unwell. You might be put in quarantine if you are in a health facility setting.

Longer term physical distancing or isolation is important to reduce the impact of COVID-19 but comes with challenges for people's wellbeing and mental health. Older people who are dependent on others for day to day care and support may find these situations particularly challenging, but there are things communities can do to look after each other.

How members of communities can support each other

Know your community

- Community groups, including older people's associations can help to map their communities. Using your knowledge of your neighbourhoods, identify the people who are the most at risk. Find out where they live and their living situation (for example, who they live with), and what support they will need, including with accessing basic supplies such as food and medicines.

- Share this information with key stakeholders, for example, home-based carers, health facilities and the Ministry of Health, local authorities, those providing food deliveries or social protection measures, and Ministries of Social Welfare.
- Consider ways in which you can monitor the situation in your communities and share this information with key stakeholders. Older people's movements will need to be restricted but if you have younger home-based carers or volunteers, for example, they could keep track of the health status of older people, identifying anyone displaying COVID-19 symptoms and working with health facilities to ensure they can access the care they need.
 - In these situations, measures need to be taken to ensure carers are well protected. They should not be at high risk themselves (either older people or those with underlying conditions) and they should be provided with clear information and protective equipment (e.g. alcohol-based hand rub, masks and gloves).
- Put in place plans for how to reach those at need with support and information.

If you are not part of a community group, you can still support your neighbours:

- Think about whether any of your neighbours might need support with shopping, accessing medicines or medical help, for example. This is particularly important if they are self-isolating.
- If you already know neighbours who are older or who have other health conditions, get in touch with them, ideally by telephone. You could also post a note through their door offering support. You could knock on a neighbour's door to check on them, but stand back from the door and maintain a distance of two metres.
- If you do not personally know your neighbours, try to introduce yourself, either by phone or through a note, and offer support to those who need it.
- Find out if there are any groups in your community coming together to organise support for older people and people with underlying health conditions.

Social engagement while we are in isolation

- Community and OPA meetings and gatherings will not be able to take place during the COVID-19 outbreak while people are being told to practise physical distancing or to self-isolate.
- Consider the other communications channels you normally use in your groups that do not involve bringing people together. How could these help to keep in touch with people and enable you to engage with each other?
- Think about whether there are ways to keep some group activities going without bringing people together. If you have regular exercise groups, you could agree ways to stick to your schedule and keep active. You could exercise together online (via Skype, WhatsApp etc) if possible, or you could agree with your friends and group members to exercise each on your own home at the same time on a given day. The same could be used for prayers, if religious services and gatherings are not possible.
- Consider a buddy scheme. Encourage group members to form small groups or pairs and agree a schedule to phone each other. This is a good way to keep in touch and make sure people are well. This can also work in communities that don't have existing groups or OPAs. Offer to pair up with a neighbour or community member and suggest a schedule to phone each other and keep in touch.
- Think about who might be feeling lonely, anxious or afraid and find ways to reach out to them.

- Be aware of your neighbours. If you notice anything unusual, for example, you don't see any sign of them around their house, check they are OK.
- If you are being asked to practice physical distancing, you may still be able to go out to take exercise, as long as you keep your distance (at least two metres or six feet) from other people. If you see neighbours, it's OK to say hello and stop for a chat, but you should always maintain two metres distance.
- Share creative ideas with your neighbours and community members about how to stay physically and mentally active during either physical distancing or self-isolation.

Ensuring people have basic supplies

- It is important for older people to have adequate stocks of basic supplies, including food and medicine in case they suddenly need to self-isolate. This should include staple foods such as pulses, grains and cooking oil; any medicines people regularly take; and basic medicines including painkillers. Current guidance is that Ibuprofen should be avoided because of potential complications in relation to COVID-19.
- Make sure OPA members are aware of the importance of keeping a longer lasting supply of food and medicines than they would usually. Support those who are less mobile to get these supplies.
- If an older person is self-isolating, home-based carers or volunteers can go shopping for them and make food and medicine deliveries. In this situation, the carer or volunteer needs to take their own precautions to stay safe (see above).
- If your OPA provides food to older people, for example at community lunches or through food banks, consider whether there is a way this service could continue through home deliveries.
- Check regularly with your neighbours or community members if they have adequate food and medicines.
- If people are self-isolating or less mobile offer to get basic supplies of food or medicine for them. If possible, deliver these to their door and avoid close contact with the older person.

What to do if someone is unwell

- Community groups, OPAs and individual community members should make sure they have information about health facilities in their local area and where to go for any support in relation to COVID-19.
- If you suspect someone may have COVID-19 you should ask the person to stay at home and isolate themselves from their household members to the greatest extent possible. You should also contact your local health facility and follow the advice you are given.
- If you are advised to take an older person to a health facility, avoid using public transport. If masks are available, both the older person and those accompanying them should wear a mask.

Please remember: COVID-19 is a serious illness, but there are things we can all do to protect ourselves and others. Taking sensible precautions is important but there is no need to panic

Find out more:

[Helpage.org/coronavirus-COVID19](https://www.helpage.org/coronavirus-COVID19)

HelpAge International
PO Box 70156, London WC1A 9GB, UK
Tel +44 (0)20 7278 7778
info@helpage.org
www.helpage.org

 @HelpAge  HelpAge International

Published by HelpAge International in March 2020 PO Box 70156, London WC1A 9GB
www.helpage.org Registered charity no. 288180