ℹ Coronavirus (COVID-19)

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Coronavirus and COVID-19: Caregiving for the Elderly

Reviewed By:

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W hen it comes to COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus, older people are especially vulnerable to severe illness. Research is showing that adults 60 and older, especially those with preexisting medical conditions, especially heart disease, lung disease, diabetes or cancer are more likely to have severe — even deadly — coronavirus infection than other age groups.

If you're caring for an older loved one, you might be worried. Alicia Arbaje, M.D., M.P.H., Ph.D. (https://www.hopkinsmedicine.orghttps://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/profiles/results/directory/profile/0018801/alicia-arbaje) specializes in internal medicine and geriatrics at Johns Hopkins. She shares what you need to know to keep elderly people safer, and what to do if they do become infected with COVID-19.

Keep yourself well

First and most important, as a caretaker you should take all the precautions you can to avoid becoming infected yourself. Here are the basics:

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water for at least 20 seconds before and after providing care, preparing food, using the bathroom, or touching surfaces in public places.

- Avoid crowds, and if you cough or sneeze, do so into the bend of your elbow or into a disposable tissue.

- Keep your hands away from your face.

- Clean frequently touched surfaces in your home often, including mobility and medical equipment used by your loved one, such as walkers, canes and handrails.

Practice social and physical distancing but not social isolation

One important way to lower the risk of your older family members catching COVID-19 is to limit in-person visits. But this may be tough for older adults who cherish time spent with friends and family members.

Arbaje says, "Social distancing doesn't have to mean isolation or loneliness. We need to keep older adults safe, but also keep in mind that social isolation can have a negative impact on older people's immunity and mental health."

She notes that in terms of social contacts, seniors should be encouraged to think beyond their usual circle of friends and family. "Saying hello to the mail carrier or checking in on neighbors close by can add to a sense of connectedness," Arbaje says.

With many houses of worship closing their doors until the pandemic eases, congregants, especially older ones, may feel cut off. "Faith communities are often a big part of older adults' social lives," Arbaje says. Caregivers might help their loved one access online services and outreach for spiritual solace and support."

Technology for Staying Connected

To help older adults feel involved, purposeful and less lonely during the pandemic:

- Show them how to video chat with others using smartphones, laptops or tablets.

- Use apps on these devices to provide captions for adults with hearing challenges.

- Encourage friends and family outside of your household to telephone, write notes or send cards to lift your loved one's spirits.

Keep elders involved

Arbaje recommends giving homebound older adults a project they can work on. "Think about going through and organizing old photos and memorabilia together, and enjoy the stories and happy memories they inspire. It can be a good time for an elder to demonstrate cooking a favorite family recipe or share favorite songs or movies with other people in the household."

Coronavirus (COVID-19) Self-Checker

Check symptoms. Protect yourself. Get information.

Minimize the risk of COVID-19 infection

Postpone unnecessary doctor visits. If an older adult in your care is feeling well, consider helping them postpone elective procedures, annual checkups and other non-essential doctor visits.

Keep in mind that many older people, especially those living with chronic illness, have important relationships with their caregivers. To help them stay in touch, ask their doctors' offices if they offer telemedicine (https://www.hopkinsmedicine.orghttps://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/telemedicine/), which enables doctors and patients to communicate over video, email or other means rather than face-to-face.

Avoid travel. Older adults should put off non-essential travel, particularly cruises or trips with itineraries that would expose them to crowds.

Decide on a plan

If you can, involve your older family member in discussions of how you'll manage interruptions of routines and what will happen if they (or someone else in your family) becomes sick. Talking things through ahead of time as a family can reduce stress and help everyone feel more involved and prepared.

Pick an emergency contact. If you're the main caregiver, designate someone nearby whom you could rely on to care for your elderly family member if you yourself become ill.

Stock up. Gather one to three months of medications, and at least two weeks' worth of food, over-the-counter remedies, pet supplies, and other essentials. Find out which delivery services are available in your area.

Symptoms or exposure? Call ahead

If you or your loved one learn that you might have been exposed to someone diagnosed with COVID-19 or if anyone in your household develops symptoms such as cough, fever or shortness of breath, call your family doctor, nurse helpline or urgent care facility. Here's what to do when you feel sick. (https://www.hopkinsmedicine.orghttps://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/coronavirus-what-if-i-feel-sick)

For a medical emergency such as severe shortness of breath or high fever, call 911.

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What you need to know from Johns Hopkins Medicine.

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