

Proactive Strategies for Managing Infectious Disease Outbreaks in Senior Care Facilities

In 2020, the rapid and overwhelming spread of COVID-19 put a spotlight on the necessity of emergency preparedness for all types of healthcare settings. For senior care facilities in particular (e.g., nursing homes, skilled nursing facilities, and assisted living communities), infectious disease outbreaks present serious threats to an already vulnerable population.

Factors such as residents' advanced age and chronic conditions, as well as close living quarters and an influx of visitors, can quickly escalate an outbreak. In response to this threat, senior care organizations should review

their existing emergency preparedness protocols and infection prevention and control programs to identify possible improvement opportunities and enhance guidance for managing future infectious disease outbreaks.

Although regulations, standards, and best practices may vary depending on the type of outbreak, valuable strategies have been learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. The following risk tips offer broad considerations for managing disease outbreaks, which senior care leaders and staff can adapt to their specific organizations.¹

1

Ensure your facility's infection preventionist (or another point person who is responsible for infection prevention and control) is monitoring state and federal public health advisories and communicating emerging information and guidance about infectious disease outbreaks.

2

Develop a plan for communicating with public health officials during infectious disease outbreaks. Identify and create a list of key contacts, and assign a point person for communicating with public health authorities.

3

Develop a communication plan to keep staff members and residents (and their family members and significant others) informed about your organization's strategy for preventing, preparing for, and managing infectious disease outbreaks. Determine a communication review process to ensure appropriate and consistent messaging.

4

Provide ongoing education for both clinical and nonclinical staff within your facility to raise awareness about infectious diseases and standards for infection prevention and control.

5

Review the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) [standard precautions](#) and [isolation precautions](#) with staff members to ensure that they (a) consistently apply the most up-to-date best practices, and (b) know when to implement protocols.

6

Ensure that all staff members are following your organization's infection prevention and control program, including emergency protocols for infectious outbreaks; staff safety procedures; and cleaning, disinfection, and sterilization processes.

7

Develop and enforce consistent, nonpunitive sick leave policies for employees. Encourage staff members to self-monitor for signs and symptoms of illness, and consider options for alternative work scenarios (e.g., telework) when possible.

8

Enforce strict adherence to your facility's hand hygiene and respiratory hygiene policies, and monitor for compliance. Make sure residents and visitors also are following good hygiene practices. Post signs and reminders in visible places throughout the facility.

9

Stock adequate hand and respiratory hygiene supplies, including plain soap, antimicrobial soap, alcohol-based hand sanitizer, paper towels, and tissues. Make sure supplies are in a convenient and easily accessible location, and provide no-touch waste receptacles.

10

Follow CDC's [best practices](#) for donning and doffing personal protective equipment (PPE). Develop a process to track and monitor available quantities of PPE, and follow CDC's [guidance for optimizing PPE supplies](#).

11

Develop a protocol for assessing incoming residents and monitoring current residents and staff members for signs and symptoms of infections. Follow the CDC's [Long-Term Care \(LTC\) Respiratory Surveillance Line List](#).

12

Develop a plan for sequestering residents who have symptoms of an infectious disease to prevent the spread of illness amongst other residents, staff members, and visitors. Follow the CDC's [Guideline for Isolation Precautions: Preventing Transmission of Infectious Agents in Healthcare Settings](#).

13

Determine criteria for suspending group activities, communal dining, and new admissions to the facility to prevent the spread of disease.

14

Be aware of rules and guidance related to limiting or restricting visitation as well as making visitation safer. Even when limitations/restrictions are not in place, encourage visitors to avoid in-person contact if they have signs or symptoms of a transmissible condition.

15

Encourage and support alternate forms of communication — e.g., video chats, emails, and phone calls — between residents and their family members and significant others to address barriers to visitation (e.g., when a family member is in quarantine).

16

Develop a protocol for transferring patients within your facility and to other facilities or designated locations during an infectious disease outbreak. Include processes for notifying transport personnel and receiving facilities about a resident's suspected or confirmed diagnosis.

17

Develop a thorough policy that advises providers and staff members how to document changes or variations in care that result from an outbreak (e.g., supply, medication, and staff shortages).

Resources

- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: Nursing Homes and Assisted Living \(Long-Term Care Facilities \[LTCFs\]\)](#)
- [American Health Care Association: Emergency Preparedness](#)
- [LeadingAge: Emergency Preparedness Regulation Dashboard](#)
- [MedPro Group: Infection Prevention and Control in Senior Care](#)
- [World Health Organization: Infection Prevention and Control](#)

Endnotes

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020). *Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) preparedness checklist for nursing homes and other long-term care settings*. Retrieved from www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/novel-coronavirus-2019-Nursing-Homes-Preparedness-Checklist_3_13.pdf; Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. (2021, March 10). *Guidance for infection control and prevention of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) in nursing homes (revised)* [Memorandum]. Retrieved from www.cms.gov/files/document/qso-20-14-nh-revised.pdf; American Health Care Association & National Center for Assisted Living. (2020, March 9). *Taking reasonable efforts to prevent COVID-19 from entering your assisted living community*. Retrieved from www.mehca.org/files/QualityRegs/AL_Guidance_Preventing_COVID19.pdf; Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. (2020, December 30). *Revised COVID-19 focused infection control survey tool for acute and continuing care*. Retrieved from www.cms.gov/files/document/qso-21-08-nltc.pdf; ECRI Institute. (2020). Overview of infection prevention and control. *Aging Services Risk, Quality, & Safety Guidance*. Retrieved from https://assets.ecri.org/PDF/COVID-19-Resource-Center/COVID-19-Aging-Care/COVID-Member-Resource_Aging-Overview_Infection-Prevention-Control.pdf

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