



A Beacon Health Options website

# Helping Older Adults Navigate COVID-19

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People age 65 and older have witnessed many historical events—man walking on the moon, the construction and destruction of the Berlin Wall, and the invention of color television. However, they haven't seen anything quite like COVID-19. The coronavirus pandemic is of particular concern to older adults because they are at a higher risk for severe illness if infected.

For this reason, people 65 and older around the world have been advised to limit their risk of exposure by remaining at home and avoiding contact with potential carriers of the virus. In response, nursing homes have suspended visitations and local organizations are recruiting volunteers to deliver food and medications to older adults.

Many people are understandably concerned about their elderly family members' physical and emotional wellness. It can be especially difficult for those separated by distance and unable to provide direct support. Regardless of distance, all family members can play a significant role in helping their loved ones navigate these uncharted waters. Below are six key questions to ask older adults to help determine any unmet needs.

## **1. How are your basic needs being met?**

Do you know how your loved one is getting groceries, medications, and basic household items? The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends older adults stay home as much as possible and have 30 days of groceries and prescriptions on hand.

Is your loved one heeding that warning or still venturing out to get supplies? Find out if any stores in their community are offering delivery or special hours for seniors to shop? If not, are there other family members, friends, neighbors, or organizations in the area who can assist? Also, check to see if your employer offers employee wellbeing services. Sometimes these services can assist employees by researching local elder care resources on their behalf.

## **2. Are you following the ?**

In addition to remaining at home, older adults—like everyone—should wash their hands thoroughly and often and avoid touching their face. Frequently touched surfaces should be cleaned and disinfected regularly. This is especially true if there are others living in the home. If someone in the home is ill, the sick person should stay in a room that is separate from those who are healthy. If possible, they should also use a separate bathroom.

## **3. Do you know the symptoms of COVID-19?**

The most common coronavirus symptoms are fever, dry cough, and tiredness. Some people may also develop nasal congestion or a runny nose, body aches, sore throat, or diarrhea. Older adults should contact their physician if they

are experiencing any of those conditions. They should seek immediate medical attention if they have shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, chest pain, confusion, difficulty walking, or blue coloration of the lips or face. If your loved one has an upcoming doctor's appointment or medical procedure scheduled, find out if it can be postponed.

#### **4. Are you feeling anxious?**

If your loved one is anxious, they are not alone. Many people are feeling uneasy due to the uncertainty of COVID-19. It is important for all adults to find healthy ways to manage anxiety as it can compromise the immune system and cause a host of other health issues.

Encourage your loved one to manage their anxiety by participating in positive activities that bring them joy within their home or yard. This could include reading, writing letters, or practicing putts in the backyard. If they have access to the internet, museums, universities, and musicians around the world are offering complimentary online access to classes, tours, and performances.

Keeping to their normal routine, minus those activities that would require them to leave their house, can also be helpful. You would be surprised how something so simple as cooking or washing the car can bring a sense of normalcy to an otherwise chaotic day.

In addition, the CDC is recommending older adults "take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including social media." A constant stream of news coverage can heighten anxiety. Older adults should confirm they are getting their news updates from reputable sources.

#### **5. Are you connecting with others?**

Loneliness, already an issue for many older adults, can be exacerbated by the social isolation created by COVID-19. Friends and family members can help by scheduling regular phone calls. Loved ones may also be able to participate in video calls, as long as both parties have access to the right equipment and an internet connection. It's best to select a technology with which you are comfortable so that you can offer coaching and encouragement.

#### **6. Are you protecting yourself from scammers?**

Unfortunately, there are people who will view this pandemic as an opportunity to scam others and often start by targeting older adults. Remind your loved one to be vigilant. People should not purchase products that claim to protect against or cure the coronavirus. Nor should they give out any personal or financial information to anyone over the phone, even if they say they are government representatives. Also, they should avoid donating to charitable organizations that they don't already know and trust.

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