Maryland
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Frequently Asked Questions:
Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and Older Adults

Updated October 22, 2020

Under Governor Larry Hogan's direction, state agencies continue to develop comprehensive and coordinated prevention and response plans for coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

The Maryland Department of Health (MDH) will communicate directly with the public, providing updates as this situation develops and accurate information about how to protect yourself and your family.

If you have questions about COVID-19 that are not answered here, call your local health department or dial 2-1-1.

What is COVID-19?
COVID-19 is a disease caused by a respiratory virus first identified in Wuhan, Hubei Province, China in December 2019. COVID-19 is a new virus that hasn't caused illness in humans before. Worldwide, COVID-19 has resulted in thousands of infections, causing illness and in some cases death. Cases have spread to countries throughout the world, with more cases reported daily.

How does COVID-19 spread?
COVID-19 is thought to spread mainly through close contact from person to person. People who are infected but do not show symptoms can also spread the virus to others.

Close contact is described by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as being within 6 feet of an infected person for a cumulative total of 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period starting from 2 days before illness onset (or, for asymptomatic patients, 2 days prior to test specimen collection) until the time the patient is isolated. Cumulative total can be determined by adding individual exposures over a 24-hour period (e.g., three 5-minute exposures for a total of 15 minutes).

- COVID-19 most commonly spreads during close contact
  - People who are physically near (within 6 feet) a person with COVID-19 or have direct contact with that person are at greatest risk of infection.
  - When people with COVID-19 cough, sneeze, sing, talk, or breathe they produce

respiratory droplets.
Infections occur mainly through exposure to respiratory droplets when a person is in close contact with someone who has COVID-19.
- ○ Respiratory droplets cause infection when they are inhaled or deposited on mucous membranes, such as those that line the inside of the nose and mouth.
- COVID-19 can sometimes be spread by airborne transmission
  - ○ There is evidence that under certain conditions, people with COVID-19 seem to have infected others who were more than 6 feet away within enclosed spaces that had inadequate ventilation.
  - ○ The amount of infectious smaller droplet and particles produced by the people with COVID-19 became concentrated enough to spread the virus to other people. The people who were infected were in the same space during the same time or shortly after the person with COVID-19 had left.
  - ○ Available data indicate that it is much more common for the virus that causes COVID-19 to spread through close contact with a person who has COVID-19 than through airborne transmission.

What are the symptoms of COVID-19?
Symptoms, or combinations of symptoms, that may appear 2-14 days after exposure include:

- Fever or chills
- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Fatigue
- Muscle or body aches
- Headache
- New loss of taste or smell
- Sore throat
- Congestion or runny nose
- Nausea or vomiting
- Diarrhea

What is the difference between the flu and COVID-19?
Because some of the symptoms of flu and COVID-19 are similar, it may be hard to tell the difference between them based on symptoms alone, and testing may be needed to help confirm a diagnosis. Flu and COVID-19 share many characteristics, but there are some key differences between the two.

- Signs and Symptoms: Both COVID-19 and the flu have common symptoms like those listed above. But, COVID-19, unlike the flu, may include change in or loss of taste or smell.
- When Symptoms Appear After Exposure: If a person has COVID-19, it could take them longer to develop symptoms than if they had flu. Typically, a person with the flu develops symptoms anywhere from 1 to 4 days after infection. A person with COVID-19 may typically develop symptoms 5 days after being infected, but symptoms can appear between 2 and 14 days after infection.

For more information, see the CDC [Similarities and Differences between Flu and COVID-19](#).

What do I need to know about the flu season during the COVID-19 pandemic?
Getting a flu vaccine during the 2020-2021 influenza season is more important than ever because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Flu vaccination is especially important for adults 65 years and older, who account for most hospitalizations and deaths from flu and from COVID-19.

For flu information and resources in Maryland, visit https://phpa.health.maryland.gov/influenza/Pages/home.aspx.

Read more from the CDC [Protect Your Health This Flu Season](#) and [Adults 65 & over are at higher risk for flu complications](#).

What is the current COVID-19 situation in Maryland?
Up-to-date information about testing and case counts in Maryland is available at coronavirus.maryland.gov. The page is updated daily.

On May 13, Governor Larry Hogan announced the beginning of Stage One of the '[Maryland Strong: Roadmap to Recovery](#),' which includes moving from a Stay at Home order to a Safer at Home public health advisory and the gradual reopening of retail, manufacturing, houses of worship, and some personal services. On June 5, Maryland moved into Stage Two of recovery with the safe and gradual reopening of workplaces and non-essential businesses. Additional reopenings through Stage Two were announced on June 10, which allowed indoor dining and outdoor amusements to resume on June 12.

On Friday, September 5, Maryland moved from Stage Two to Stage Three of the 'Maryland Strong: Roadmap to Recovery' with additional safe and gradual reopenings of most activities with social distancing and face covering requirements. Stage Three will be implemented in multiple phases with a flexible, community-based approach that empowers individual jurisdictions to make decisions regarding the timing of reopenings. For the reopening status of Maryland's jurisdictions, please visit https://governor.maryland.gov/recovery/.

Marylanders are advised to heed all state and local public health guidance:
- Older people, and those who and have underlying health conditions which put them at greater risk for COVID-19 are advised to avoid crowds
- Everyone should continue wearing masks or face coverings in public areas, businesses, and on public transportation
- Marylanders should continue practicing physical distancing, staying six feet apart when possible

On October 1, Governor Hogan announced additional relaxing of rules on visitation in nursing homes. Indoor visitation may resume at Maryland nursing homes where no new cases have been reported in 14 days or more. He also detailed greater flexibility for compassionate care visits, and an additional $6 million specifically for testing nursing home staff. More information is available [here](#).

Information about the Hogan administration's ongoing response to COVID-19 is available at https://governor.maryland.gov/coronavirus/.

Do older adults have a higher risk of becoming more seriously ill from COVID-19?
Older adults (age 60+) and those with pre-existing medical conditions have a greater risk for serious illness, and in some cases death, if they become infected with COVID-19. Examples of pre-existing medical conditions include: cancer, diabetes, heart disease or other conditions that impact the immune system's ability to fight germs.

If you are an older adult or you have one or more chronic health conditions, you can take action to reduce your risk of exposure to COVID-19:

- Take everyday precautions to keep space between yourself and others
- Keep away from others who are sick, limit close contact and wash your hands often with soap and water or hand sanitizer with at least 60 percent alcohol content
- Avoid crowds as much as possible

Should I wear a face mask?
On September 1, Gov. Hogan announced further amendments to the statewide masking order that has been in effect since April 18. All Marylanders over age 5 should continue wearing face coverings in indoor public areas, retail stores, outdoors when unable to maintain social distancing, and on public transportation. Face coverings are also required in offices of physicians and dentists, hospitals, pharmacies, and laboratories; and at work in any area where interaction with others is likely such as shared areas of commercial offices. Face coverings should cover both your nose and your chin to properly protect against infection. Read the order at https://governor.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Gatherings-12th-AMENDED-9.1.20.pdf

Masks and face coverings can be made from household items and include wearing a scarf or bandanna that covers the nose and mouth. The CDC has detailed guidance and instructions regarding homemade masks and face coverings available at https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/diy-cloth-face-coverings.html

Masks and face coverings should not be placed on young children under age 2, anyone who has trouble breathing, or is unconscious, incapacitated or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance. People with disabilities who are unable to wear a mask are provided reasonable accommodations per the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The masks and face coverings recommended are not surgical masks or N-95 respirators. Those are critical supplies that must continue to be reserved for healthcare workers and other medical first responders, as recommended by current CDC guidance. The CDC has also advised that face coverings with ventilators should be avoided.

Should I cancel plans to travel?
MDH issued a public health advisory for out-of-state travel. Under the advisory, Marylanders are

strongly advised against traveling to states with positivity rates of 10% or higher. Anyone traveling from these states should get tested and self-quarantine while awaiting results.

The public health advisory applies to personal, family, or business travel of any kind. Marylanders are advised to postpone or cancel travel to these areas until their positivity rates decline. Read the travel advisory at https://phpa.health.maryland.gov/Documents/07.29.2020%20-%20MDH%20Notice%20-%20Out%20of%20State%20Travel%20Advisory.pdf.

At this time, the CDC warns that travel increases your chance of getting and spreading COVID-19. Staying home is the best way to protect yourself and others from COVID-19.

The CDC warns: You can get COVID-19 during your travels. You may feel well and not have any symptoms, but you can still spread COVID-19 to others. You and your travel companions (including children) may spread COVID-19 to other people including your family, friends, and community for 14 days after you were exposed to the virus.

Don't travel if you are sick or if you have been around someone with COVID-19 in the past 14 days. Don't travel with someone who is sick.

If you must travel:

- Avoid contact with sick people.
- Wear a mask or face covering in public.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not readily available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer that contains at least 60% alcohol.
- It is especially important to clean hands after going to the bathroom; before eating; and after coughing, sneezing or blowing your nose.
- Avoid traveling if you are sick.

People who are at increased risk for serious illness are also advised to avoid non-essential air travel.

CDC recommends travelers defer all cruise ship travel worldwide.

Visit the CDC travel advisory site to check on current travel warnings if you are planning a trip abroad: https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/index.html.

What can I do to be prepared for COVID-19?
Older adults are advised to prepare in the following ways:

- Check your regular prescription drugs to make sure you have an adequate supply; refill your prescriptions if needed

- Have an adequate supply of non-prescriptive drugs and other health supplies, including pain relievers, stomach remedies, cough and cold medicines
- Have enough household items, groceries, and water on hand so that you will be prepared to stay at home
- Consider ways of getting food brought to your house through family, social or commercial networks if you are forced to stay home for longer than your supplies allow
- Stay in touch with others by phone or email; you may need to ask for help from friends, family, neighbors, community health workers, etc. if you become sick
- Determine who can provide you with care if your caregiver gets sick
- Practice social distancing — keep distance between yourself and others

Wash your hands after putting away groceries, touching money or handling anything that comes from outside the home. Clean your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after blowing your nose, coughing, or sneezing, or having been in a public place. Ask anyone entering your home to wash their hands upon entering.

Use commercial cleaning products to wipe high-touch points often, including:

- Canes, walker grips, wheelchair arms, push handles and brake handles
- Handrails and commode chair handrails, faucets, doorknobs, and refrigerator handles
- Reacher/grabber handles and pill boxes
- Telephones, remotes and light switches

What is social distancing?
The best way to slow the spread of COVID-19 is through "social distancing," which means staying at least six feet away from others. Social distancing can take many forms, depending on your lifestyle and your family or living situation. Social distancing can include the following habits and steps:

- Avoid handshaking, hugging and other intimate types of greeting
- Stay at least six feet away from others whenever possible, and wear a mask
- Avoid non-essential travel (your health care provider may have specific guidance for your situation)
- Avoid crowds, especially in poorly ventilated spaces
- Avoid unnecessary errands — consider ways to have essential items, like food and other household supplies, brought to you through delivery services or through family or social networks

For older adults, social distancing is especially important because they are a high risk group. It is recommended that those at a high risk of becoming seriously ill from COVID-19 stay home as much as possible.

While social distancing and self-quarantine are needed to limit and control the spread of the disease, social connectedness is important. Virtual resources can and should be used during this time. Talk to your friends and family on the phone or over video to stay connected.

What should I do if I think I am sick with COVID-19?
If you exhibit any of the symptoms of COVID-19, call your health care provider and ask about next steps. If you don't have a health care provider, contact your local health department.

What can I do to support older adults?
- Know what medications your older loved one is taking and contact them to ask if they need refills or an extended supply of medication
- Check in with any older friends or family members regularly by email or phone to see if they need assistance, food, water or other supplies. Always wash your hands and keep a safe distance when visiting.
- If a loved one is living in a care facility, monitor the situation — ask the facility about its protocol if there is an outbreak and about the health of other residents

How is MDH helping care facilities?
MDH is working with Maryland care facilities to reduce the spread of COVID-19. MDH has provided education to facilities about the signs and symptoms of COVID-19 and has asked facilities to be particularly vigilant in recognizing and reporting potential cases of COVID-19.

On April 29, Gov. Hogan issued a new order to protect residents and staff at nursing homes, including:

- Universal testing of all residents and staff at all Maryland nursing homes, regardless of whether they are symptomatic. Nursing homes will be prioritized based on an imminent outbreak or a current rising threat risk, and any staff who test positive will be immediately discharged into isolation.
- Mandatory compliance and cooperation with state strike teams.
- Daily evaluation of residents by a physician, nurse practitioner, physician's assistant, or registered nurse.
- The development of surge staffing plans to ensure continuity of care in the event of an outbreak. To aid in this effort, the state is supplementing strike teams with new bridge teams, which will provide emergency clinical staffing to nursing homes that are experiencing a staffing crisis.
- Regular informational updates for residents, resident representatives, and staff regarding COVID-19 infections.

More information about the order is available at https://governor.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Nursing-Homes-Amended-4.29.20.pdf

Effective October 1, Governor Hogan announced that indoor visitation may resume at Maryland nursing homes where no new COVID-19 cases have been reported in 14 days or more, along with greater flexibility for compassionate care visits for residents who may require additional support.

In addition, new testing guidelines were announced expanding the use of rapid antigen tests—which could be used to screen visitors—while continuing to require regular diagnostic testing depending on local conditions.

Read the [Notice - October 2020 COVID-19 Updates to Nursing Homes and Assisted Living Programs (October 1, 2020)](#).

Recommendations for infection control and COVID-19 prevention in facilities serving older adults is available at https://coronavirus.maryland.gov/pages/hcf-resources.

Information from the CDC for long-term care facilities is available at: cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/healthcare-facilities/prevent-spread-in-long-term-care-facilities.html.