



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

Updated May 28, 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?

- Between people who are in close contact with one another (within about 6 feet)
- Through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes or talks
- These droplets can land in the mouths or noses of people who are nearby or possibly be inhaled into the lungs
- Some people without symptoms may be able to spread the virus

The best way to prevent illness is to avoid being exposed to COVID-19.

What are the symptoms of COVID-19?

Symptoms, or combinations of symptoms, that may appear 2-14 days after exposure include:

- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing

- Fever
- Chills
- Muscle pain
- Sore throat
- New loss of taste or smell
- In more severe cases, pneumonia (infection in the lungs)

Other less common symptoms have been reported, including gastrointestinal symptoms like nausea, vomiting or diarrhea.

What is the current COVID-19 situation in Maryland?

Up-to-date information about testing and case counts in Maryland are available at coronavirus.maryland.gov. The page is updated daily.

On May 13th, 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 reopenings of retail, manufacturing, houses of worship, and some personal services. On May 27th, Gov. Hogan announced the resumption of outdoor dining and additional activities allowed to complete State One of the Recovery plan for Maryland (effective Friday, May 29, at 5:00 p.m.).

Despite reopening, older adults and those people with underlying health conditions, who are vulnerable to serious illness from COVID-19, are strongly advised to continue staying home as much as possible. Employers should continue to encourage telework for their employees when possible. Individuals who can work from home should continue to do so.

Maryland citizens should continue wearing masks in indoor public areas, retail stores, and on public transportation. The amended Reopening of Certain Businesses and Facilities order is available at <https://governor.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Gatherings-7th-AMENDED-5.27.20.pdf>

For the reopening status of Maryland's jurisdictions, please visit <https://governor.maryland.gov/recovery/>

Up-to-date 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 April 15, Gov. Hogan issued an executive order directing that effective April 18, all Marylanders are required to wear face coverings when inside retail establishments or when riding any form of public transportation in the state. Read the executive order at

<https://governor.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Masks-and-Physical-Distancing-4.15.20.pdf>

Cloth 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 cloth face coverings available at

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/diy-cloth-face-coverings.html>

Cloth 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 cloth 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.

Should I cancel plans to travel?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is updating travel advisories as warranted.

CDC does not generally issue advisories or restrictions for travel within the United States.

However, cases of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) have been reported in all states, and some areas are experiencing community spread of the disease.

Visit the CDC travel advisory page on domestic travel:

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/travelers/travel-in-the-us.html>

At this time, the CDC recommends that travelers avoid all nonessential international travel. If you must travel:

- Avoid contact with sick people.
- 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 avoiding close contact with 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
- 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

As a preventive measure to slow COVID-19 outbreaks, Governor Hogan has banned gatherings of more than 10 people, and indoor restaurants, bars and movie theaters have been closed. Schools are also closed to avoid social contact with school children and staff.

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 ensure they are prepared for 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>

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.