



Best Practices to Help Nursing Home Residents and their Families to Reduce the Impact of Social Isolation

Many infection control measures implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic led to social isolation among nursing home residents across the United States. Although strict infection control precautions were necessary to prevent the spread of the virus, prolonged social isolation contributed to physical and mental health challenges among nursing home residents. This document highlights ways nursing home staff can help residents and families balance the need for social involvement with necessary infection prevention strategies.

HELPING RESIDENTS AND BALANCING RISK

Nursing homes can give residents power in decision making by:

- Employing [person-centered care approaches](#), such as providing residents choice in day-to-day living and care planning decisions. Certain elements of person-centered care are required by law.
- Helping residents protect themselves by staying up to date on their vaccinations; discussing concerns about vaccinations if they have any; and using strategies to reduce risk, such as masking and socially distant visits when appropriate.
- Encouraging resident participation in their nursing home's resident council to discuss concerns in a supportive group setting. Resident councils are groups for residents to meet privately to discuss issues related to the nursing home. Although not all nursing homes have Resident Councils, residents have a legal right to form and participate in these groups, and nursing homes must consider any concerns raised by the group.
- Connecting residents with the [Long-Term Care Ombudsman program in their State](#). Ombudsmen are advocates who are trained to resolve problems and provide education on residents' rights.

APPROACHES TO HELPING RESIDENTS WHO ARE ISOLATED

Some nursing homes have found ways to encourage residents to stay connected to others, even when physical distancing is necessary for infection control. Strategies include:

- Providing opportunities to build social connections. For example, in Connecticut, long-term care ombudsmen connected residents to an AARP program known as [Zero Isolation: Building Integrated Communities](#) that pairs older adults with university students and teaches them how to build social connections with one another.
- Helping elders use technology. For example, residents can use video calls to keep in touch with family and friends, which creates a sense of social routine and provides essential human connection.

- Offer small group activities in addition to or in place of larger ones. Small group activities, either in-person or offered virtually, can provide opportunities for meaningful connection among those with shared interests. Pairing together residents and staff with shared passions or hobbies can be a powerful way to build relationships. Nursing home staff may also be able to use technology to collect information about resident interests and efficiently sort topics by level of interest.
- Being innovative about ways to connect residents with their families, such as creating comfortable spaces outside to visit or encouraging visits from a safe distance.

ENCOURAGING FAMILY PARTICIPATION

Family members can help prevent and reduce social isolation. Strategies include:

- Joining the [family council](#) at the facility to provide support, voice concerns, request improvements, and engage with other family members. If a family council does not exist, inform families about their right to form one and encourage participation.
- Visiting in person. [Current guidance](#) allows for in-person visitation in most cases and includes details about core principles of infection prevention such as hand hygiene, masking, and physical distancing as needed. When virtual visits are the safest option, consider providing a device for making video calls. Tablets and other devices also let families share photos, videos, and music with the resident.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Additional resources, including “Best Practices for Managing Resident Deconditioning”, can be found in the AHRQ COVID-19 Nursing Home Resource Catalog, available at <https://www.ahrq.gov/nursing-home/resources/search.html>.



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