



AGENCY FOR HEALTHCARE RESEARCH AND QUALITY



## Best Practices for Promoting Emotional Well-Being in Nursing Home Residents

Efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19 in nursing homes have left many residents socially isolated. Isolation can contribute to anxiety, depression, and memory impairment, and can worsen dementia and cognitive decline even after social restrictions are eased. For many older adults, the negative effects of social isolation can be as harmful as infection. Nursing home leaders and staff can engage residents and reduce isolation while maintaining necessary infection control and prevention practices. This document describes strategies for safely reducing feelings of social isolation and improving resident well-being.

### APPROACHES TO REDUCING SOCIAL ISOLATION

#### Recognize Signs of Depression and Anxiety

Nursing home leaders should consider training staff to increase their awareness of signs of anxiety and depression in residents, which may include changes in:



Food or water consumption, such as eating or drinking more or less than usual



Verbalizing, such as trouble finding words



Cognition, including forgetfulness



Activity levels, including withdrawing from social activities or becoming less sociable



Sleep, such as sleeping more than usual or difficulty falling or staying asleep

Nursing homes may benefit from using a checklist such as a PHQ-2, PHQ-4, or PHQ-9 to screen for and document changes. When staff notice signs of depression and anxiety in residents, they should refer the resident to social services or a social worker at the facility, or any other necessary mental health professional for evaluation and treatment. Nursing home leaders should also remove barriers to residents receiving mental health treatment by supporting in-person or telemedicine mental health visits. While the mental health appointment is pending, staff can also request an assessment from the on-call physician to determine whether an underlying physical health problem or issues with medication are contributing to a change in the resident's mental health status. Nursing home staff should also consider using the Geriatric Depression Screening tool upon admission, quarterly, and as needed.

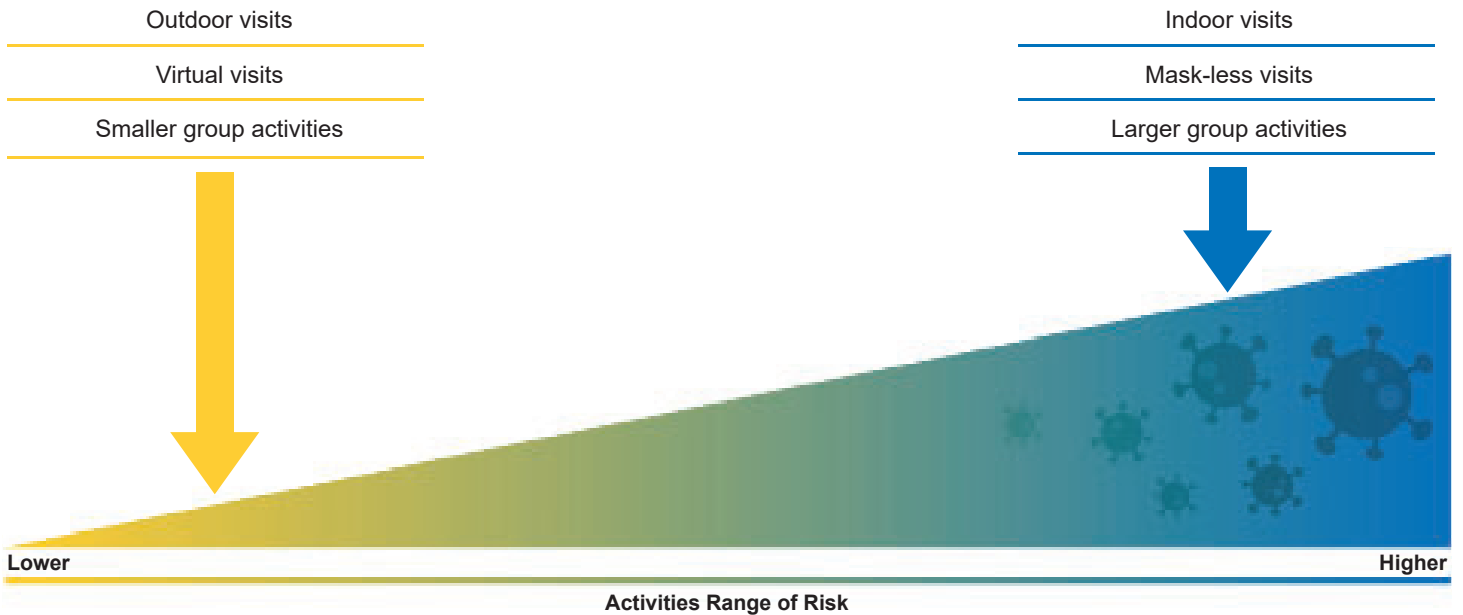


## Modify Activities to Maintain Social Connections While Protecting Against COVID-19

Nursing home staff can maintain social connections to help promote residents' well-being by modifying community activities. Modifications can be based on current positivity rates, vaccination rates, facility policies, or state or federal guidance. The image below illustrates a range of risk of spreading COVID-19 for different activities.

As an alternative to indoor activities, nursing homes can offer outdoor or virtual programs, such as video sessions on a tablet. Facilities could also provide telephones that are equipped with volume-controlled settings and large buttons for easy dialing. To support virtual programming and video sessions, facilities can consider providing Wifi access to residents. For higher functioning residents, staff could offer access to and trainings on using social media platforms.

Or they can offer a mix of options, such as both outdoor visits and vaccinated gatherings. Additionally, nursing home leaders can modify activities by layering strategies to minimize transmission risk wherever possible, such as through vaccination, distancing, masking, and use of physical barriers such as clear dividers. For example, a social activity such as an exercise group could be offered in multiple ways to minimize risk. It could be held indoors or outdoors (weather permitting) with all residents and instructors vaccinated, masked, and distanced from one another. Alternatively, it could be held virtually.



## Ensure Opportunities for Safe Visitation

Nursing homes should develop visitation policies for a variety of scenarios, keeping in mind the risks. For example, outdoor visits generally pose fewer risks than indoor visits, but weather and medical conditions for outdoor visits may increase the risk of overheating or dehydration.

To keep residents safe while reducing social isolation, nursing home leaders may need to think creatively about ways to connect residents and families. This may mean making outdoor spaces more comfortable by changing seating or adding patio heaters or sunshades.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

Additional resources including information about depression and anxiety in older adults, can be found in the AHRQ COVID-19 Nursing Home Resource Catalog at: [AHRQ.gov/NHwellbeing](https://www.ahrq.gov/NHwellbeing)



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