



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

Updated April 23, 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. COVID-19 is thought to be able to spread like the cold or flu through:

- coughing and sneezing, which creates respiratory droplets
- close personal contact, such as touching or shaking hands
- touching an object or surface with the virus on it

Symptoms of COVID-19 include:

- fever
- coughing
- shortness of breath
- in more severe cases, pneumonia (infection in the lungs)

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 March 30, Gov. Hogan issued a Stay at Home order. Maryland residents should not leave their home unless it is for an essential job or for an essential reason, such as obtaining food or medicine, seeking urgent medical attention, or for other necessary purposes. More information about the stay at home order is available at <https://governor.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Gatherings-FOURTH-AMENDED-3.30.20.pdf>

On March 5, Gov. Hogan declared a state of emergency to further mobilize all available state resources. The declaration officially authorized and directed the MDH and the Maryland Emergency Management Agency (MEMA) to ramp up coordination among all state and local agencies. The declaration also enables MDH and MEMA to fast-track coordination with our state and local health departments and emergency management teams.

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 all 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 become sick with fever, cough or have difficulty breathing, 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 prepare?

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.

Additionally, facilities have been asked to monitor their staff for signs of respiratory illness, to re-educate staff about infection prevention practices such as hand washing, to take inventory of available personal protective equipment (PPE) and to create plans to prepare for PPE shortages.

On April 5, Gov. Hogan enacted an emergency order to protect residents and staff at Maryland nursing home facilities, and bolster the state's mitigation and suppression efforts amid outbreaks of COVID-19 by restricting visitation and implementing infection control protocols. The directives require nursing home facilities to adjust and strengthen their policies, protocols, and procedures in line with all state and federal guidance related to COVID-19.

More information about the emergency order is available at

<https://governor.maryland.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Nursing-Homes-4.5.20.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.