



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

Updated March 20, 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?**

Maryland currently has confirmed cases of COVID-19.

Up-to-date information about testing and case counts in Maryland are available at [health.maryland.gov/coronavirus](https://health.maryland.gov/coronavirus). The page is updated daily.

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
- When you go out in public, 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

### **What do I do if there is a confirmed case of COVID-19 in my community?**

Widespread transmission of COVID-19 in the United States is occurring, and experts expect that in the coming weeks and months, we can expect to see more cases in the U.S. and worldwide.

Community spread is how the common cold and flu are transmitted — meaning people catch it from each other while going about their daily lives. Reported community spread of COVID-19 in parts of the U.S. raises the level of concern about the immediate threat for the affected communities.

Depending on the severity, public health officials will recommend certain actions to help reduce your risk of being exposed to COVID-19 if an outbreak happens in your community. These actions can slow the spread and reduce the impact of disease.

If COVID-19 is spreading in your community, follow directions from public health officials. You may be asked to do one or more of the following:

- Monitor for symptoms of illness: including fever, cold-like symptoms, cough, difficulty breathing or shortness of breath

- Quarantine at home: used to separate and restrict the movement of those who are well but who may have been exposed to disease but do not show symptoms to help stop the spread of disease
- Isolation at home: used to separate those who are sick from those who are healthy to help stop the spread of disease

If you are asked to do any of the above, your health care practitioner or local health department will provide information about how to proceed.

You may also be asked questions about your recent travel, activity and interaction with others outside your home. This is a normal part of contact tracing, which health care practitioners and scientists use to help determine the risk of COVID-19 exposure in communities.

### **Should I cancel plans to travel abroad?**

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

At this time, CDC recommends that all persons defer any travel on cruise ships worldwide, including river cruises, because of the increased risk of COVID-19 transmission onboard ships. Deferring travel is especially important for older adults and all people with serious chronic medical conditions (such as heart disease, diabetes or lung disease), because of their increased risk for serious illness. People who are at increased risk for serious illness are also advised to avoid non-essential air travel.

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 and avoid crowds

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.

### **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 review and update visitor policies, 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.

Recommendations for infection control and COVID-19 prevention in facilities serving older adults is available at [health.maryland.gov/coronavirus](http://health.maryland.gov/coronavirus).

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](https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/healthcare-facilities/prevent-spread-in-long-term-care-facilities.html)