

How will COVID-19 impact veterans?

In light of the ongoing 2019 Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, many veterans have been asking questions about what the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and its medical facilities are doing to protect and care for veterans during the outbreak. The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs is in daily communication with VA leadership and would like to share the following information:

Since this situation is evolving rapidly, we encourage veterans and their families to consult VA's public-facing website for the most current information: www.va.gov/coronavirus. Guidance from local VA medical facilities about their current operating status is available on each facility's website, which can be found through VA's facility locator tool: https://www.va.gov/find-locations.

What should veterans do if they think they have COVID-19?

Before visiting local VA medical facilities, community providers, urgent care centers, or emergency departments in their communities, veterans experiencing COVID-19 symptoms—such as fever, cough, and shortness of breath—are encouraged to **call their VA medical facility** or call **MyVA311** (**844-698-2311, press #3** to be connected). Veterans can also send secure messages to their health care providers via MyhealtheVet, VA's online patient portal. VA clinicians will evaluate veterans' symptoms and direct them to the most appropriate providers for further evaluation and treatment. This may include referral to state or local health departments for COVID-19 testing.

What about routine appointments and previously scheduled procedures?

VA is encouraging all veterans to call their VA facility before seeking any care—even previously scheduled medical visits, mental health appointments, or surgical procedures. Veterans can also send secure messages to their health care providers via MyhealtheVet and find out whether they should still come in for their scheduled appointments. VA providers may arrange to convert appointments to video visits, where possible and veterans should feel free to request telehealth appointments from their VA providers.

Can visitors still access VA medical facilities?

Many VA medical facilities have cancelled public events for the time being, and VA is urging all visitors who do not feel well to postpone their visits to local VA medical facilities. Facilities have also been directed to limit the number of entrances through which visitors can enter. Upon arrival, all patients, visitors, and employees will be screened for COVID-19 symptoms and possible exposure.

What about VA nursing homes and spinal cord injury units?

On March 10, 2020, VA announced that its 134 nursing homes (also called VA community living centers) and 24 spinal cord injury and disorder centers would be *closed* to all outside visitors. All clinical staff will be screened for COVID-19 daily before entering the nursing home or spinal cord injury units, and staff will work only within those units to limit possible transmission of the virus. Exceptions to the visitor policy will only be made for cases when veterans are in their last stages of life on hospice units or inpatient spinal cord injury units.

How can the Committee on Veterans' Affairs help?

If there is any way the Committee on Veterans' Affairs can be of assistance to you or a veteran you know, please email hvac.majority@mail.house.gov.

The Committee is also interested in hearing about veterans' experiences accessing care in their communities. Please feel free to e-mail any stories that could help inform the Committee's oversight of VA's response to COVID-19.

How you can help prevent the spread of COVID-19

The CDC released guidelines individuals can follow to protect themselves and their communities from COVID-19. These precautions include washing your hands for 20 seconds with warm water and practicing social distancing so the virus does not unitentionally spread to other people.

Since many veterans care for family members at high risk of contracting COVID-19, it is important to contact state and local health authorities for next steps and treatment.

Supporting others

The significant impact COVID-19 has on daily routines may cause unanticipated stress on some veterans in crisis. Help is available for veterans in crisis by calling the Veteran Crisis Line at 1 (800) 273-8255 and pressing 1, at VeteransCrisisLine.net/Chat, or by texting 838255.

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