

## Caring for Seniors During COVID-19

COVID-19 poses several challenges in caring for our older adults. As we know, our elderly tend to have more adverse outcomes if they develop COVID-19. As such, many are seeking alternative platforms for care or are not receiving their routine care for chronic conditions. While telehealth, either by video or phone, is beneficial to continuing care and an option for us, caring for seniors who live alone and may not have access to North Shore Connect or MyChart through their phone or a computer, those who do not have the technology to support the video platform, and/or those with no phone, it creates a new challenge. Those with physical limitations, such as hearing, visual and cognitive impairments, also pose additional challenges.

For those of us who care for older adults, care of this population becomes not only about continued treatment of chronic illnesses, but also heightened identification of their increasing social isolation, food insecurity, elder neglect, and support needs in the home. This is especially true of those vulnerable adults in the community with limited-to-no social support at baseline, those who have a cognitive impairment, and those who have limited health care access. Further, many of the assisted living facilities and nursing homes have intensified their quarantine restrictions and visitor access.

While no one is immune from COVID-19, it's become distressingly obvious that seniors are particularly vulnerable to the novel coronavirus. According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), people 60 and older are among those most likely to experience severe and potentially deadly complications – including respiratory distress and organ failure – should they become infected with COVID-19. The danger only increases when an older adult suffers from preexisting and underlying medical problems, especially heart disease, lung disease, diabetes or cancer.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created unique challenges for families hoping to stay in touch with vulnerable loved ones. Those who are 65 or older, or who live in assisted living or senior care facilities, have been listed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as high-risk for the virus. For most families, keeping senior loved ones safe from infection means forgoing in-person visits and finding other ways to create connection. Luckily, there are more resources available than ever to help families stay close even while social distancing.

Most of us have long been aware that loneliness is a key health and wellness issue for older adults. To help seniors feel connected, we usually can recommend engaging in a wide array of activities to fit any interest. Now, of course, so many social activities have been put on hold due to pandemic. As the weather turns cooler, and the opportunities to gather outdoors at a distance will diminish, there will be even fewer opportunities to see others in person at a distance. How can we help the older friends and family members in our lives who are feeling isolated? Here are some ideas to suggest and investigate.

**Encouraging loved ones to focus on staying busy and maintaining their health will help ensure they get through the COVID-19 crisis mentally and physically fit.**

If you are caring for an older family member, you're probably feeling overwhelmed with worry. But by taking a few common-sense precautions and following some simple guidelines, you can greatly increase the odds that your elderly loved one will remain safe and healthy during this unprecedented public health crisis.

## Practice Good Personal Hygiene

Good personal hygiene habits are the first line of defense against COVID-19, as well as colds, flu and other contagious illness. To lessen the chance of getting sick, you and your loved one should: Wash hands frequently. Use soap and water for at least 20 seconds before and after providing care, preparing food, using the bathroom, or touching surfaces in public places.

- Sneeze and cough into a tissue or the bend of your elbow.
- Keep your hands away from your eyes and your face.
- Clean frequently touched surfaces often, including mobility and medical equipment used by your loved one, such as walkers, canes and handrails.

## Stock Up on the Essentials

To avoid unnecessary shopping trips, the CDC is recommending everyone stock up on essentials during the pandemic:

- Get prescriptions refilled early if possible and make sure your elderly loved one has a ready supply of any over-the-counter medications they might need. If other needs arise, many pharmacies are offering free delivery services for the duration of the outbreak.
- Keep a 14-day supply of food on hand. Focus on nutritious foods that keep well and are easy to prepare.
- Make sure your loved one has an adequate supply of toilet paper, hand soap, and household cleaners and supplies.
- Wear a mask and maintain social distance when you do head to the grocery store or shopping, or consider using Instacart/Amazon or similar delivery services.

## Practice Social Distancing. Avoid Social Isolation.

Millions of Americans have been ordered to stay at home and curtail non-essential travel to help slow the transmission of COVID-19. Even in states where lockdowns are easing, the elderly and those with chronic conditions are being encouraged to continue most social distancing practices. But doing so can be difficult for seniors, especially if they were already struggling with the adverse effects of social isolation. To make your elderly loved one stays connected from home:

- Teach them how to use FaceTime, Zoom, or similar apps and schedule regular video chats with friends and family.
- Encourage absent friends and family to telephone regularly, write notes, and send cards to lift their spirits.

## Keep Seniors Involved and Busy

Your elderly loved one doesn't have to withdraw from life just because they're stuck at home.

- The lockdown is the perfect time to start that new hobby they've long talked about or handle tasks they've been putting off.
- If they belong to a religious congregation, see if online services are available.

- Suggest they participate in any virtual programs – online book clubs, museum tours, senior fitness classes – being offered by their local community senior center or library.
- Keep your loved one entertained by signing up for Netflix or other streaming services. Encourage movies and programs that you know they would enjoy.
- Encourage your family member to stay informed of current events, but limit TV news to an hour a day to avoid unnecessary anxiety.

## Minimize Opportunities for Infection

Staying at home and avoiding physical contact with others is the best way to minimize the risk of infection.

- Enlist family and friends to run occasional errands, but ask that they leave any purchases at the front door or outside, if possible.
- Shop online and take advantage of the free delivery and curbside pickup services now being offered by many stores.
- Postpone unnecessary doctors' appointments or ask about available telemedicine services. If your elderly loved one must be seen in person, make sure they wear a mask and follow all necessary social distancing protocols.
- Staying at home doesn't mean staying inside. Encourage your elderly loved one to get some fresh air — taking a brief walk (if they're able), spending time in the yard, or sitting on their porch/deck — whenever the weather permits.

## Know the Signs and Symptoms COVID-19

Contact your elderly loved one's doctor if they develop any symptoms of COVID-19, including:

- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Fever
- Chills
- Muscle pain
- Sore throat
- New loss of taste or smell

*Call 911 if they experience any signs of severe infection, including:*

- Trouble breathing
- Persistent pain or pressure in the chest
- New confusion
- Inability to wake or stay awake
- Bluish lips or face

While the above symptoms do require immediate attention, do not head to the emergency room on your own. Inform the dispatcher that you're seeking care for someone who may have COVID-19 and follow their instructions.

## Stay in Touch Using Telecommunication

In the United States, individuals aged 60 and older are more likely to live alone than in any other country in the world. During the coronavirus pandemic, social distancing presents unique emotional and mental challenges for seniors who are already alone most of the time. It is crucial for you to stay in regular communication with older loved ones during the outbreak, not only to provide them with much-needed social interaction, but to also keep tabs on their health and healthcare needs.

### **Telecommunication is the safest way to maintain contact with seniors during the coronavirus outbreak.**

Phone calls and emails are the easiest, most accessible options for seniors who may not be tech-savvy. However, seniors who can use a smartphone can install and use video chatting apps like Skype, Zoom, Facetime, and Facebook Messenger to both talk to *and* see their loved ones during communication. Video chatting can be helpful for seniors' loved ones because it allows them to see *how older loved ones look and how their homes look*. You can assess whether your loved one is losing weight, looks ill, or hasn't been able to keep up with housework. If you sense that a senior loved one is ill or isn't able to keep up with housework, it may be time to seek outside help.

### **Getting care during COVID-19**

In addition to checking in on their mental health, ensuring they are keeping up with their physical health is just as important. Today, telemedicine video appointments are more common than ever. With the need to be physically distant, virtual visits they allow doctors to see their patients without being in the same room.

Staying in contact with a doctor this way is extremely important. They know your loved one's health history and needs and can help them adjust to being at home more, whether that be recommending activities to keep their brain sharp or exercises that help strengthen muscles. Connect instantly with a doctor during a scheduled appointment.

### **Talk to Your Loved One's Doctor**

It is a good idea for you to join your parent on his or her tele-appointments. Be sure to have the list of their current prescriptions and ask questions about any additional medications, such as, how long they should take them and how you can get refills. Prompt your parents to talk to their doctor about any medical concerns they're having. Many elderly patients aren't always completely honest with their physicians because of fear of a bad diagnosis, i.e., COPD, cancer, Parkinson's disease or a form of dementia.

Talk to the doctor ahead of time to alert them to any medical situations you don't feel your parent will be honest about. Because of HIPAA, your parent's doctor cannot give you information about their health without proper authorization or a valid medical power of attorney document (POA).

### **Checking in on mental health**

Many older adults may have struggled with loneliness and isolation before we became faced with a pandemic. Today, those feelings may be worse for some. People who are isolated have a higher risk of struggling with depression, anxiety and sleep, or developing heart disease or dementia. Call your older family members often to check in and speak with them. If they are set up with video calls, schedule a regular day and time that you'll call. Most seniors are entitled to weekly or biweekly

counseling via telehealth with a physician's order. If your loved one could benefit from professional counseling support and services, call their primary care MD to discuss.

**Schedule weekly video calls** to connect with them. You may need to set them up with a video capable device. Remember, this can help them schedule telemedicine video calls with their doctor, too.

- **Coordinate activities**, like reading the same book or watching a movie at the same time, then calling to discuss with them.
- **Make video calling easy**

Tools like FaceTime, Skype, Zoom and WhatsApp allow families to communicate via video calls. Most of these apps and platforms are free to download. FaceTime video calling comes standard with iPhones, while [Skype](#) and [Zoom](#) offer free video conferencing on a variety of devices, and [WhatsApp](#) is a free video calling and messaging app that works on Androids or iOS.

With all of the options, it can be overwhelming to choose just one. Let your senior relative's needs be your guide. The best apps and platforms are those that are easy to use and accessible to our loved ones. If they already have a smartphone, tablet or computer that has a built-in video chat platform, that might be the easiest option. Or if they have already been using a particular app, continue with that.

## Try senior-friendly tech products

**Connect on social media.** Connect with former neighbors, classmates and colleagues on Facebook. You may find you have even more in common now than you did when you were younger.

Look up [Facebook Portal or Portal TV](#).... Amazing and wonderful technology for families to connect with one another and be in one another's living rooms. <https://portal.facebook.com>

There are a number of smart devices designed to address the needs of seniors. For tablets, many recommends [GrandPad](#), a simplified tablet with large text and buttons, as well as added security features to prevent spammers from contacting your loved one. In regard to phones, the [Jitterbug Flip](#) and [Smart2](#) from GreatCall are senior-specific cell phones ([greatcall.com](http://greatcall.com)). The Flip is a very simple flip phone with large buttons and a built-in emergency button. The Smart2 is GreatCall's version of a smartphone, again tailored to seniors with an emphasis on ease-of-use and a simplified interface.

The right product will, of course, depend on your loved one's age and abilities. It is recommended to pre-load any new device with all the apps you're planning to use and setting up the accounts.

**Check out libraries.** Programming for most libraries across the country is now online and open to people anywhere -- an ideal option for seniors who want to engage with others while being productive.

**Talk about books.** You don't have to read alone -- book clubs are easily moved from in person to online via Zoom.

**Schedule a virtual story time or regular phone touch base.** FaceTime or Skype to read a book or a collection of poems. Connect with family members as often as possible over the phone or as a

group on Zoom. One family caregiver calls her father the same time each day to do a devotional and say a prayer. Send a quick text to stay connected, even if you can't stay on the phone. Connecting with an older adult each day could give him or her something to look forward to.

### **Pick up the phone, and do so twice as often**

It's important to remember that a good old fashioned phone call still works. And I recommend that family caregivers who are at a distance increase the frequency of their phone calls from the pre-coronavirus time. As social distancing measures increase, it is more important than ever to connect with your senior loved ones, stay in the loop on their health needs and prevent these feelings of isolation. Our loved ones need more frequent contact, socialization and reassurance now. We may not be together physically, but we can still make connections, and it's vital that we do so on a regular basis.

**Chat on a phone/video calls.** Put together a group of people available for regularly scheduled chats by phone or via video conferencing app like Zoom. The more the merrier, because frankly, none of us have much "news" to share these days since we don't go out much. The more people, the livelier the conversation.

**Learn something new.** Now is the perfect time to learn a new skill or take one you already have to the next level through free or paid online classes.

**Do exercise.** Group fitness is another online option. Many local park districts and fitness centers offer on-demand or live guided exercise classes of all types and abilities.

### **Encourage Exercise**

**Encourage your loved one to keep moving.** Now more than ever it's important for older adults to stay active. They could serve the dual purpose of keeping a senior active while helping to improve balance and prevent falls. Encourage an older adult to keep moving around the home or apartment. Even better, suggest an outdoor walk, while reminding him or her to practice social distancing.

Many seniors rely on senior exercise programs at their local gyms to maintain muscle tone and cardiovascular health. Unfortunately, these programs are on hiatus during the coronavirus outbreak. As a result, many seniors may see their gains in strength and balance dwindle, as they get less exercise and perform fewer strength-builder activities.

Fortunately, there are ways to encourage your elderly loved ones to stay active during COVID-19 social distancing.

- Offer to take a "virtual walk" together, and video chat or chat via cell phone with your loved one while you both take a walk around your respective neighborhoods.
- Offer links to online resources for seniors, including [Go4Life.nia.nih.gov](https://www.go4lifeforlife.gov), which provides seniors free exercise videos, plus motivation and safety tips.
- Other free online resources for senior exercise routines.
- Make an effort to reach out to your loved one and encourage them to exercise on a daily basis. Even if he or she doesn't feel comfortable leaving their home to take a walk, they can make an effort to stretch, stand up regularly, and drink more water throughout the

day.

**Resurrect popular hobbies.** If your loved one likes reading, drop off or mail books and magazines they might enjoy. Some older adults like to knit and crochet, work crossword puzzles and craft. Try to help older adults engage with those hobbies, whether it's ensuring they get the supplies they need or joining in on the activity via FaceTime, Skype or Zoom. Encouraging use of technology like the senior-friendly [GrandPad](#) that offers a number of ways to keep seniors busy with games and interactions with family.

**Make mealtimes an activity.** If seniors are still cooking for themselves, help them plan out their menus each week with their favorite healthy foods and make sure they have a way to get groceries such as through deliveries. Phone or Skype during mealtimes to help provide companionship, which can enhance appetite and the mealtime experience.

There are multiple support networks for food and food delivery to seniors.

- Meals on Wheels (local senior centers or CJE)
- Personal chefs for seniors
- Free meal delivery options for local community favorite restaurants
- UBER eats and Grub Hub app services
- Local food banks

**Watch a show together.** Highlight game shows as one particularly interactive way to engage seniors. Employing technology or even a telephone, sync up times where you can watch popular senior programs such as "Jeopardy," "Wheel of Fortune," "Family Feud" and "Price is Right" with them. See who can get the right answer first!

**Take your loved one on a trip down memory lane.** Encourage a senior to get out a scrapbook and talk about the photos and memories of events they represent. Or look through your own photos you can send to a senior and discuss what memory he or she has of the photos.

## Take a Virtual Vacation

Most resorts, museums and other fun destinations are closed to the public, but you can still explore the world together from the safety of your own home. Why not give them a call and take a tour of an online museum together? You can find free online virtual tours of destinations like Yellowstone National Park, the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, the Louvre in Paris and even Mars. As long as your senior loved one has access to a smart device, they'll be able to follow along at your chosen destination.

[https://nyphil.org/playson?fbclid=IwAR1JfK-avwrGnl7O5bQJKTS3rlx7yaoxQG5QHM1tmIYRyaWaNWQ4sAOPH\\_Q](https://nyphil.org/playson?fbclid=IwAR1JfK-avwrGnl7O5bQJKTS3rlx7yaoxQG5QHM1tmIYRyaWaNWQ4sAOPH_Q)

NY Philharmonic concerts free online

<https://hyperallergic.com/547919/2500-virtual-museum-tours-google-arts-culture/>

Museums with free tours of collections around the world

<https://www.travelandleisure.com/attractions/museums-galleries/museums-with-virtual-tours>

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/travel/2020/03/18/these-historic-sites-attractions-are-offering-virtual-tours-during-coronavirus-pandemic/>

## **Rediscover Snail Mail**

Remember that the mail is still an option, and it can give anyone an emotional lift to get a handwritten card, a letter or a gift in the mail. It is highly recommended to send letters regularly, in addition to your other methods of communication include family pictures and interesting newsworthy articles.

## **Send Care Packages**

As many seniors remain confined to their homes, it is important for healthy younger individuals to help them access essential products and supplies. If you have the financial resources, an essentials care package can help your senior loved one weather these hard times. Sending a care package with nonperishable goods, household items and medications — things they may need but shouldn't have to go to the stores for.

*Care package items can include:*

- Non-perishable food items like frozen foods, canned goods, pre-prepared meals and snack items
- Easy to bake desert items
- Games, puzzles, or a box of cards
- Large print books, sudduko or word searches
- Magazines
- Toilet paper, paper towels, disinfecting wipes, and hand sanitizer
- Personalized cards or messages

You can drop off or mail a care package to a senior's doorstep, so it's an easy way to show you care without breaking the social isolation recommendation.

## **Enlist Caregivers' Help**

If your loved one has limited abilities, lives in a senior care facility or has an in-home care provider, see what their caregivers can do to assist them in staying in touch. Many facilities are purchasing tablets and having staff take them to residents' rooms periodically to video chat with their families. This is particularly important for residents who are unable to manage it by themselves. If your loved one needs some extra care and support of a cna, caregiver or companion there are national licensed/bonded home care agencies located in every suburb and city nationwide that provide hourly, daily and up to live in caregivers. On a temporary or long-term basis.

## **Plan a Window Visit**



Drive by a senior's home, apartment or care community. If a senior is confined to a bed, work with staff to position him or her near a window. Hold up signs or messages from family and friends. If you don't live in the same community as your senior, try to engage a family or church or synagogue member to arrange a greeting on your behalf to help your loved one know you're thinking of him or her.

You've likely seen viral photos of "window visits" people are having with senior family members at their homes or outside of senior care facilities. During these visits, family members stay outside, but they chat with their loved one on the phone or bring handmade signs with messages. It feels much more like a normal visit when they can see their loved ones.

In addition to window visits, families are also putting a social distancing spin on other types of house calls. Caregivers have told me their loved ones sit on their porch and family and friends sit on a lawn chair in the yard far away and they visit that way, or from a car.

## **Help with Daily Activities**

When an aging parent is recovering from an illness or has been diagnosed with a disease, they may not be able to do all the daily activities they once did. You can help an aging parent by getting more involved in their daily lives and assisting them while making sure everyone stays safe. Other aging adults, those who still live independently, may just need an extra hand with their daily activities.

- Drop off a fresh, home cooked meal or frozen meals that can be easily heated. Look into having healthy, ready-made meals shipped directly to their home.
- Set up a schedule for a monthly housekeeper.
- Offer to submit an online order for parents shopping for necessities and arrange for groceries or other items directly to their home. Some stores are even offering free delivery for high risk and elderly shoppers to ensure a safe (and affordable) way to receive their necessities.
- Run their errands for them. From keeping track of their tele-appointments to picking up medications, there are so many ways you can support them at a safe distance.
- Now is the time to help your parent manage their money and pay bills. It's a good idea to have your parent add you to their checking account in the event they're hospitalized or unable to make a payment.
- Keep a record of all of your parents' current prescriptions and check in regularly to make sure they are taking them, as prescribed.
- Type up a list of all emergency contacts, family members and point of contacts for EMT.
- Locate and review DNR and POLST and POA for health and property.... Review and update, if needed. Post in the Kitchen for the EMT/Paramedics in an emergency to grab.

## **Get Outside Help**

The government offers more than 1,000 benefit and assistance programs covering health, disability, income, wealth, veteran status, education level and more. [Benefits.gov](https://www.benefits.gov) is the official benefits website of the U.S. government and is a great source to start with. The local AAA's are senior centers that are a great place to ask about programs that can help your aging parent with:

- Prescription drugs
- In-home services (chore & homemaker services)
- Local transportation services
- Housing (IL, AL, MS, rehab and skilled care)
- Healthcare
- Financial assistance (Medicaid, SSI, and Food stamps)
- Legal aid
- Energy/utility assistance
- Nutrition (meals on wheels)

## Resources for Caregivers

- The U.S. Health and Human Services Department's Administration on Aging runs a service called [Eldercare Locator](#), which connects older Americans and their caregivers with local support resources such as meals, home care and transportation, as well as caregiver needs training. It can be reached online or at its toll-free number (1-800-677-1116).
- Aging Life Care Association ALCA elder care manager finder for US [aginglifecare.org](http://aginglifecare.org).
- The Eldercare Location can help you find and contact your local Area Agency on Aging (AAA). AAAs were established under the 1973 Older Americans Act as organizations to help vulnerable older Americans. Many AAAs provide meals, transportation and in-home services. Services may currently be limited due to the coronavirus outbreak, but contact your local agency to find out.
- Check the CDC website for updates on [guidelines](#) regarding the coronavirus. The website provides details for families and households about how to stay safe and be prepared in the event that a family member falls ill from COVID-19. Specific information is available for high-risk individuals, including older adults.
- Build a support network. It is always important for the primary caregiver to have a network of support caregivers but it is particularly important during a global pandemic. "Make a plan in case you get sick," said Bill Walsh, of the AARP. "Identify your caregiving team – friends, neighbors and other family."
- Look for online support groups and hotlines. These networks can offer valuable advice as well as emotional support. AARP runs a caregiver support line at [1-877-333-5885](tel:1-877-333-5885) as well as a [Facebook group](#) for caregivers. They are also holding [weekly webcasts](#) about COVID-19 and what it means for older adults and family caregivers.
- Cognitive impairments dementia does not increase risk of COVID-19, but dementia-related behaviors may increase risk. The Alzheimer's Association [lists tips](#) specific to dementia caregivers during the outbreak.
- Listing of Memory Café programs (for seniors with memory loss and Alzheimer's disease and related dementias in the US... many have virtual online programs during Covid <https://www.memorycafedirectory.com/>

## How can I help my senior loved one stay safe and well cared for from afar?

Long-distance caregiving presents unique challenges. There are many resources to support you and your loved one. First, learn as much as possible about your loved one's situation, including any safety risks or care gaps. Current travel restrictions, social distancing and shelter-in-place requirements can make this discovery process challenging, but not impossible. Call and ask questions about how they are coping with all the news and about their daily life: Do you have plenty of groceries? Are you calling your friends instead of visiting them?

Once you have an understanding of their local environment and situation, you can start to explore different options to ensure your loved ones' needs are being met, such as:

- Hiring a professional in-home caregiver to assist with activities of daily living (meal prep, personal care and hands on assistance with bathing, dressing and grooming), provide medication reminders, and be a reassuring companion/driver/advocate.
- Purchasing a *medical alert system (PERS) personal emergency response system* to enable independence while still ensuring help is available when needed; there are many different types, for a variety of uses and benefits, and these systems can be lifesaving for seniors with serious medical conditions. Companies such as Lifeline, Life Alert, and Medical Guardian have wonderful 24 hr. monitored services. <https://www.consumerreports.org/medical-alert-systems/how-to-choose-a-medical-alert-system/>
- Staying connected to your loved one virtually via senior-friendly smartphones, computers, or tablets.
- Some communities have "*friendly caller programs*" where the local police call daily to check in. Also, additional services thru their towns like snow removal program, trash removal, for seniors might exist. Check in with your local community/village/township to see what senior services they provide.
- If your loved one's needs become increasingly hard to stay at home, you may want to consider an assisted living community/memory care community as a *back-up plan to their current living environment*. Most senior housing communities offer virtual tours and 7 days a week, counselors to discuss their service offerings, amenities and housing options.
- Investigate an **Aging Life Care Manager (ALCA) AKA a Geriatric Care Manager** is one quick, easy and thorough way to onboard a client/family senior care advocate, especially if you are caring for a loved one in another city or state [www.aginglifecare.com](http://www.aginglifecare.com)
- A local [Area Agency on Aging](#) near your loved one may also have suggestions, particularly for modest to low-income seniors and for free services and assistance.
- Look into **Homethrive** a national "virtual" care management firm that helps with seniors and their loved one's by providing monthly service packages for a social worker to assist with advice and consultation <https://www.homethrive.com/about-us>.