



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

Updated March 10, 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.

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.

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 testing and case counts in Maryland are available at health.maryland.gov/coronavirus. The page is updated daily.

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.

Currently, people are at risk for contracting COVID-19 who:

- Recently traveled to geographic areas of concern
- Have close, personal contact with a person diagnosed with COVID-19
- Care for people with COVID-19

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?

It is likely that at some point, widespread transmission of COVID-19 in the United States will occur. Experts expect that 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 a lot of 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?

At this time, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that people who are at risk for serious illness, including older adults and those with pre-existing medical conditions, avoid cruise travel and non-essential air travel.

If you must travel, CDC is updating travel advisories as warranted and has advised against nonessential travel to some geographic areas of concern. Those with underlying health conditions are advised to avoid nonessential travel to certain areas as well.

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

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 should I do if I think I am sick with COVID-19?

If you have recently traveled to any geographic area of concern or were in contact with someone with COVID-19, and you become sick with fever, cough or have difficulty breathing, seek medical care right away. Follow these steps:

- Call your doctor or emergency room before you go
- Tell them about recent travel and close contacts (such as people in your household)
- Wear a mask, if one is available

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
- 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.

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)