



Infectious respiratory disease prevention: responsibilities and obligations

Communication toolkit

This toolkit provides information and material to support aged care providers and workers understand their responsibilities and obligations to prepare for and prevent the spread of infectious respiratory diseases.

Audience

- Residential aged care providers and workers
- Primary and allied health professionals providing services in residential aged care homes

Background

Older age is one of the biggest risk factors of serious illness from infectious respiratory diseases such as COVID-19 and influenza (flu).

Aged care residents are particularly vulnerable because of their pre-existing health conditions, complex care needs and close living arrangements.

Aged care providers have obligations under the Aged Care Quality Standards to have policies and protocols in place to help prevent, prepare for and manage outbreaks of infectious respiratory diseases.

The [Communicable Diseases Network Australia](#) and the [Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care](#) provide specific guidance and resources for use in aged care settings, such as residential aged care and home care service delivery.

Regular vaccination is our best line of defence against severe illness, hospitalisation and death from infectious diseases. The World Health Organization (WHO) considers immunisation to be the most effective medical intervention to prevent deaths and reduce disease in our communities. It's estimated immunisation programs prevent about 2.5 million deaths globally every year.

Residential aged care providers are responsible for making sure their residents have timely access to vaccinations and antiviral treatments. Providers should also work with Primary Health Networks (PHNs) and health providers, including GPs, pharmacists and nurse practitioners, to ensure residents are up to date with their recommended vaccine doses.

COVID-19 and flu vaccination rates in residential aged care homes are lower than they need to be. The Department of Health and Aged Care is providing guidance and support to help aged care providers increase vaccination rates and protect aged care residents.

What's in this toolkit

- Key messages
- Discussion guide
- Newsletter article.

Key messages

These messages may assist you to communicate with your aged care workers, aged care residents and home care participants to:

- help prevent the spread of infectious respiratory diseases
- meet your infection prevention and control (IPC) responsibilities and obligations.

Responsibilities as an aged care provider

- Common infectious diseases like COVID-19 and influenza (flu) are a very real risk for older people, and we must do all we can to protect them.
- Residential aged care providers should make sure aged care residents and workers are protected against these serious illnesses. You are responsible for making sure residents have easy access to regular vaccinations and oral antiviral treatments.
- You need to prepare for and prevent infectious disease outbreaks and ensure:
 - residents have timely access to recommended vaccinations as soon as they are eligible and consider organising regular vaccination clinics
 - effective IPC programs and protocols are in place, including relevant worker training and knowledge on IPC measures and outbreak management procedures.
- Providers should maintain their own vaccination records.
- Regular vaccinations are the best defence against severe illness, hospitalisation and death. Aged care residents are particularly vulnerable to severe illness from infectious diseases because of their age and health care needs.
- Residents can receive a vaccination from a GP or pharmacist visiting your aged care home. Older people can also access vaccinations at community health centres or Aboriginal health services.
- [Contact your local Primary Health Network \(PHN\)](#) if you need help with arranging a GP to undertake vaccinations at your aged care home. PHNs partner with primary care vaccination providers, local organisations and service providers to help protect those most at risk.
- Residential aged care providers should support residents who are not yet vaccinated or are eligible for their next vaccination to get vaccinated as quickly and safely as possible.
- You can use the department's [free translation service to develop communication products](#) in other languages for multicultural and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Your IPC obligations

- Aged care providers are responsible for [IPC training for all workers](#), including:
 - aged care workers
 - kitchen, cleaning, and laundry workers
 - volunteers
 - administration and management workers.

- Learn about your IPC obligations under the [Aged Care Quality Standards](#) and access resources to develop your emergency and outbreak management plans:
 - [Aged Care Infection Prevention and Control Guide](#)
 - [National Guideline for the Prevention, Control and Public Health Management of Outbreaks of Acute Respiratory Infection in Residential Aged Care Homes](#).

Vaccination advice and guidance

- Work with your local PHN and health providers, including GPs and pharmacists, to ensure your residents are up to date with the latest COVID-19 [vaccine recommendations](#):
 - If a person is 75 years and older, it's recommended they have a COVID-19 vaccination every 6 months.
 - People aged between 65 to 74 years, are eligible for a COVID-19 vaccination dose every 6 months, based on their individual health needs following discussion with a healthcare provider.
 - All adults are eligible for annual COVID-19 and flu vaccinations.
- Free flu vaccinations are available under the National Immunisation Program (NIP) for [people most at risk](#), including all eligible residents aged 65 years and older.
- Administering COVID-19 and flu vaccines at the same time is safe, improves uptake of each vaccine and increases protection against both diseases.
- Residents don't have to wait 6 months between their last COVID-19 infection and having a COVID-19 vaccination.
- Talk to your aged care residents, their families and carers, and your workers about the benefits and safety of vaccinations.
- Vaccines are a safe and effective way to protect them and others in the community from common infectious diseases.
- As with all other vaccines, remember informed consent is required for each vaccination. You are responsible for discussing, organising and recording consent from residents before vaccination.
- People aged 70 years and over may be eligible for free pneumococcal vaccines which can help prevent some types of pneumonia.

Call to action

- Ensure you meet your IPC obligations, understand what you can do to [prepare for and prevent infectious respiratory disease outbreaks](#).
- There are various training opportunities for aged care workers, find out how you can [improve your IPC skills](#).
- Make sure you have the latest, check out healthdirect.gov.au for [up-to-date information on colds and flu](#).

Discussion guide

This discussion guide aims to assist you to communicate with your aged care residents and recipients, their families and carers, as well as your aged care workers to help prevent the spread of common infectious diseases.

Why are vaccinations needed?

Vaccination is important for everyone, particularly for people at high risk of severe illness. This includes older people, people who are immunocompromised and people with disabilities.

For people aged 75 years and older, a COVID-19 vaccine is recommended every 6 months.

People aged 65 to 74 years are eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine dose every 6 months, following discussion with a healthcare provider.

All adults are eligible for annual COVID-19 and flu vaccinations.

Residents don't have to wait 6 months between their last COVID-19 infection and having a COVID-19 vaccination.

Vaccines help protect you from the more dangerous impacts of infectious diseases, like COVID-19 and flu and help you recover faster.

Speak to your GP, pharmacist or nurse practitioner if you're at high risk of severe illness from infectious diseases like COVID-19 and flu.

Are vaccines safe?

All vaccines available in Australia have been assessed and approved by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) following a rigorous evaluation process to make sure they are safe and effective.

Find more information on vaccine safety on the Department of Health and Aged Care website, [health.gov.au](https://www.health.gov.au/search/vaccine-safety) search 'vaccine safety'.

You can talk to your GP, pharmacist or nurse practitioner about your vaccine options and ask questions if you have concerns.

How do I get a vaccine?

You can get vaccinations from your GP, pharmacist or nurse practitioner, local health clinic or Aboriginal health service.

You can find information about vaccinations and book an appointment with the [HealthDirect health service finder](https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/healthdirect-health-service-finder) or call 1800 022 222 if you need advice.

Most vaccines, including COVID-19 vaccines, are free.

You can find out about your vaccine eligibility or find a health service at [healthdirect.gov.au](https://www.healthdirect.gov.au)

What are the side effects of vaccines?

Common side effects of COVID-19 vaccinations include a headache, fatigue or fever and chills. Symptoms are generally mild and usually do not last more than 24 hours.

You may experience a sore arm from the flu vaccination.

If you are concerned about vaccine side effects, speak to your GP or other health professional before getting vaccinated.

How often are vaccines needed?

A COVID-19 vaccination is recommended every 6 months for people aged 75 and over. People aged 65 to 74 years (or those with compromised immunity) are eligible for a COVID-19 vaccine dose every 6 months, following discussion with a healthcare provider.

All adults can consider an annual COVID-19 and flu vaccination.

It's safe to get the COVID-19 and flu vaccines on the same day.

You don't have to wait 6 months between your last COVID-19 infection and having a COVID-19 vaccination.

Protection from vaccines wanes over time, so those who are more vulnerable like older people, need to have them regularly.

It's important to keep up-to-date with vaccinations throughout the year and get your recommended doses as soon as you are eligible.

Are COVID-19 and flu vaccinations mandatory for aged care workers?

COVID-19 vaccinations are not mandated for aged care workers or volunteers.

Aged care workers and volunteers are encouraged to get a COVID-19 and flu vaccination annually.

Providers may offer a vaccination program, through:

- a free service offered onsite, or
- making arrangements for workers to access the vaccine at a local chemist or GP.

What can I do if I get COVID-19?

Older people are advised start antiviral treatments as soon as possible after COVID-19 symptoms appear, within the first 5 days.

The treatment may help COVID-19 from becoming severe.

Early assessment for antiviral treatment is essential.

Talk to your GP or nurse practitioner to find out whether the antiviral treatments are right for you.

Where can I find information about vaccination?

You can find information about vaccinations and book an appointment with the HealthDirect health service finder or call 1800 022 222 if you need advice.

How should antimicrobial stewardship be implemented in home care?

Effective IPC measures are crucial for reducing the spread of antimicrobial resistance (AMR). Vaccination also contributes to reducing the risk of AMR because it can:

- prevent infectious diseases
- reduce the prevalence of primary viral infections.

The [Aged Care Infection Prevention and Control Guide](#) (Aged Care IPC Guide) outlines:

- practices to promote appropriate antibiotic prescribing and use, to reduce the risk of increasing resistance to antibiotics

- strategies to improve antimicrobial use.

The following resources may assist in maintaining effective AMS:

- The Australian Government's [Antimicrobial Resistance website](#) provides information on AMS in aged care. It highlights the importance of AMS programs in residential aged care homes to improve antimicrobial use and prescribing practices.
- The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care Offers resources on antimicrobial resistance and [stewardship](#) in aged care, aiding healthcare providers to improve antimicrobial use.
- The [Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission](#) provides extensive resources on antimicrobial resistance and stewardship, focusing on optimising and minimising the use of antimicrobial medicines to combat antimicrobial resistance.

How is IPC considered in assessing risk?

Aged care providers need to find a balance between minimising the spread of infection and reducing the impact on those receiving and providing care.

Risk assessments must ensure the Charter of Aged Care Rights and worker rights are prioritised. Further guidance on [person-centred](#) IPC strategies and risk assessment can be found in the [Aged Care IPC Guide](#).

The following resources may assist with enhancing your IPC operational readiness:

- [IPC operational readiness self-assessment checklist](#)
- [IPC governance self-assessment checklist](#)
- [Infection Control Monitoring Checklist](#).

Providers must discuss key decisions with aged care residents and participants when planning for and managing outbreaks. This includes understanding resident choices on:

- isolation arrangements
- if temporary relocation during an outbreak is appropriate and consented to.

Isolation should only be implemented after discussion and consideration of the residents psychological, emotional, and physical harm and only after an individual risk assessment has been completed.

Further guidance on outbreak management can be found in the [National Outbreak Management Guideline for Acute Respiratory Infection \(including COVID-19, influenza and RSV\) in Residential Aged Care Homes](#).

What precautions do aged care workers need to take to manage COVID-19 positive older people?

A risk assessment will inform the minimum level of precautions required when caring for an older person with COVID-19, including:

- likelihood of transmission to others
- individual care worker protection
- ensuring quality care for the older person.

Additional precautions may be required by organisations and individual aged care workers.

When caring for an older person with COVID-19, the risk of transmission is low if the aged care worker is wearing a surgical mask with eye/facial protection as well as using other IPC strategies.

Increased protection, for example, using a particulate filter respirator (PFR) instead of a surgical mask, is recommended if additional risk factors are present, such as:

- when an older person has a suspected or confirmed respiratory infection and needs assistance with an aerosol-generating or other high-risk procedure
- the older persons room is not well ventilated
- when the older person is cognitively impaired and unable to follow basic IPC precautions, such as covering their mouth when coughing or sneezing.

See Chapter 4 of the [Aged Care IPC Guide](#) for further information.

What is considered an acceptable percentage for aged care resident vaccination?

The department has not determined an 'acceptable percentage for resident vaccination'. However, it is understood that some residents, their families and carers, have refused vaccinations due to a lack of information about the benefits of vaccines.

Everyone has the choice to have vaccinations or not. The Australian Government strongly encourages aged care residents to regularly vaccinate to help protect themselves and their fellow residents. Aged care providers must make COVID-19 and flu vaccinations accessible to their staff and residents.

Do I have to provide consent for a vaccine?

[Informed consent](#), either verbal or written, is required for each vaccination.

Residential aged care providers, GPs, pharmacists and vaccine providers are responsible for discussing, organising and recording consent before vaccination.

Residential aged care providers are responsible for keeping consent records for all residents.

Some jurisdictions have specific requirements relevant to guardians (or substitute decision-makers) consenting on behalf of another person. Refer to relevant state and territory laws for more information.

What happens if an aged care provider doesn't provide vaccinations or IPC measures?

Under Aged Care Quality Standard 3: Personal care and clinical care requirement, aged care providers are expected to minimise infection-related risks through implementing standard and transmission-based precautions to prevent and control infection.

The Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission may take regulatory action if a provider is found to be exposing aged care residents to harm because the necessary preventative measures are not in place, such as:

- IPC process oversight, audit and monitoring, including record keeping
- disease outbreak prevention, detection and management
- access to vaccines, oral antiviral treatments and timely medical services
- ensuring all workers receive IPC education and training.

Aged care homes must be aware of the risk factors and the importance of:

- clinical leadership and training
- infection prevention and control measures
- up-to date vaccinations and testing programs.

What does IPC look like in home care?

Identifying and managing risks in home or community aged care settings can be difficult.

To address these challenges and risks, providers should establish a comprehensive IPC system that includes:

- IPC-related guidelines and policies
- clearly defined key roles and responsibilities
- audits and feedback
- infection monitoring
- education and training.

All IPC systems should be structured on the basic principles of risk management and the hierarchy of controls.

The [Aged Care IPC Guide](#) provides detailed guidance on:

- establishing IPC systems
- core components of IPC
- risk assessment and management
- hierarchy of controls for home and community and residential aged care.

Do all aged care workers need IPC training?

Maintaining an adequate and sustainable workforce is essential to preventing and managing infections and delivering quality care and services to residents.

Providers should offer training programs to support workers and health professionals to fulfil their IPC responsibilities including education for care workers to reduce the risk of contracting or spreading infection.

Competency assessments should be a part of the training system and conducted on a regular basis.

[Training and resources](#) are available to strengthen IPC knowledge and support individuals and organisations to respond appropriately to outbreaks in aged care, acute care, and non-health care sectors.

Newsletter item

You can use this content in your organisation's newsletter or intranet.

Vaccination saves lives

Infectious diseases like COVID-19, flu and pneumonia are still a constant very real risk for older people. Older age is one of the biggest risk factors for serious illness, hospitalisation or death from these illnesses.

Prevent and manage outbreaks

Aged care providers and workers must implement infection prevention and control (IPC) measures, including making vaccinations accessible.

All workers should do [IPC training](#), including

- aged care workers
- kitchen, cleaning, and laundry workers
- volunteers
- administration and management workers.

Download the [Aged Care Infection Prevention and Control Guide](#) to learn about your IPC obligations.

When to get vaccinated

If a person is 75 years and older, it's recommended they have a COVID-19 vaccination **every 6 months**.

People aged between 65 to 74 years, are eligible for a COVID-19 vaccination dose every 6 months, based on their health needs following discussion with a healthcare provider.

All adults are eligible for annual COVID-19 and flu vaccinations.

COVID-19 and flu vaccines can be administered at the same time. You don't have to wait 6 months between a COVID-19 infection and vaccination.

People aged 70 years and over may be eligible for free pneumococcal vaccines, which can help prevent some types of pneumonia.

Book in for vaccinations

Vaccinations can be given by a GP, pharmacist or nurse practitioner, at your local clinic, community health centre or Aboriginal health services.

You can also find a health service at healthdirect.gov.au or call 1800 022 222.

Aged care homes should arrange a health provider to visit for vaccinations. Or speak to their local [Primary Health Network](#) for help to organise.

It's critical eligible age care residents get vaccinated as quickly and safely as possible – helping protect them as well as the community.