



# Fact sheet: For older Australians about COVID-19

**30 April 2020**

This fact sheet is for the information and advice of older Australians. It outlines the COVID-19 facts and the measures you, your family and friends can take to protect older Australians.

The spread of COVID-19 and Australia's response is evolving. We will provide updated versions of this Fact Sheet when new information comes to hand at [www.health.gov.au](http://www.health.gov.au).

People aged 70 years and over; people aged 65 years and over with chronic medical conditions; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people aged 50 years and over with chronic medical conditions; and people with compromised (weakened) immune systems are at greater risk of more serious illness if they are infected with coronavirus. For information about which chronic medical conditions and immune system problems place people at increased risk please visit:

<https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/advice-for-people-at-risk-of-coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-for-people-with-chronic-health-conditions>

## What is COVID-19 (coronavirus)?

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses that cause respiratory infections. These can range from the common cold to more serious diseases. COVID-19 is the disease caused by a new coronavirus (SARS-COV-2). It was first reported in December 2019 in Wuhan City in China. It has now become a global pandemic.

## How is it spread?

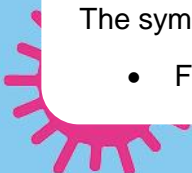
The virus can spread from person to person through:

- contact with droplets from an infected person coughing or sneezing
- touching objects or surfaces (like doorknobs or tables) that have droplets on them from an infected person, and then touching your mouth or face
- people with COVID-19 who are infectious from approximately 48 hours before they get symptoms

## What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of COVID-19 are similar to colds and flus and can include:

- Fever



## Do I need to be tested if I have those symptoms?

Your doctor will tell you if you need to be tested and will arrange for the test.

Generally you will be tested if you develop fever or respiratory symptoms and meet at least one the following criteria:

- you have returned from overseas in the past 14 days
- you have been in close contact with someone diagnosed with COVID-19 in the past 14 days
- you travelled on a cruise ship (either passenger or crew) in the 14 days before developing symptoms
- you are a health care, aged care or residential care worker
- you live in an area where there is a higher risk of community transmission, as defined by the local public health unit.

People in high-risk settings will be tested if there are two or more people with fever and respiratory symptoms in the setting. High-risk settings include residential aged care facilities

If you are in hospital, have a fever and/or serious respiratory symptoms, and there is no other clear cause of the symptoms, you will have a test arranged by your doctor.

Some states and territories may have more testing criteria based on their respective cases.

## Why is COVID-19 so dangerous for older people?

The risk of serious illness from COVID-19 increases with age. The highest rate of fatalities is among older people, particularly those with serious health conditions or a weakened immune system. There is currently no cure or vaccine for COVID-19.

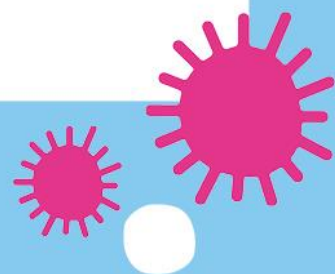
For people living with dementia or some other form of cognitive impairment, the ability to follow instruction or to alert others about potential symptoms may be a challenge. This is especially so where there is a limited capacity to communicate verbally or express pain and discomfort. In this situation, observation by someone who knows the person with dementia may assist in identifying changes in their health.

To protect older Australians and those with compromised immune systems we all need to work together to help stop the spread of COVID-19.

## I am an older person, what can I do?

Even if you are feeling well it is important to take steps to prevent the spread of this virus.

The National Cabinet has asked that older Australians stay at home unless it is for essential purposes like food shopping, medical appointments and exercise.



This advice relates to:

- people 70 years of age and older
- people 65 years of age and older with chronic health conditions
- Indigenous Australians 50 years of age and older with chronic health conditions
- people with compromised (weakened) immune systems.

Good hygiene and taking care when interacting with other people, are the best defences for you and your family against COVID-19. This includes:

- covering your mouth and nose when you cough and sneeze with your elbow or a tissue
- disposing of tissues immediately after they are used, into a dedicated waste bin and washing your hands
- frequently practising hand hygiene; this means either washing your hands with soap and water or using an alcohol-based hand sanitiser, including before and after eating and after going to the toilet
- avoiding touching your face and eyes
- using alcohol-based hand rub (sanitiser), where available
- cleaning and disinfecting surfaces you touch regularly
- where possible, staying 1.5 metres away from other people
- if you are sick, avoiding contact with others.

If you start to feel unwell, phone the National Coronavirus Helpline on 1800 020 080 or your GP who will be able to provide you with further advice.

## Can I go to the shops or catch the bus, or should I stay in my own home?

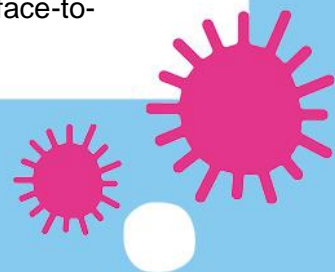
The Australian Government has asked that older Australians stay at home unless it is for essential purposes like food shopping, medical appointments and exercise.

Essential home care services may still be delivered to you, with necessary precautions in place. Where possible, this should be through the usual services currently providing these services. The good hygiene measures described above should be observed. You should also stay at least 1.5 metres away from other people. Personal care providers will use the necessary precautions for any unavoidable closer contact involved in your care.

## How can I access health services?

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian Government has introduced, and will continue to introduce, measures designed to contain the spread of the virus, minimise potential exposure for patients and health workers and aim to take pressure off hospitals and emergency departments.

New Medicare Benefits Schedule (MBS) items have been introduced for Telehealth services. This means appointments with your Doctor or healthcare professional can now take place over a phone or via a video call. These Telehealth services may substitute some face-to-face consultations.



Currently, services that can be accessed via Telehealth include GP services, mental health treatment, chronic disease management, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health assessments, services to people with eating disorders, and services to patients in aged care facilities, and may include after-hours consultations when appropriate.

To see if you can attend your medical appointments using Telehealth, ring your healthcare professional directly.

## Should I still go to the doctor?

You can still go to medical appointments if necessary. If you do leave your home, it is important that you remember to practise good hygiene and social distancing. As discussed above, you may be able to access your healthcare providers via Telehealth.

To see if you can attend your medical appointments using Telehealth, ring your healthcare professional directly

## Are other vaccinations important?

It is very important that you reduce your risk of getting other illnesses while COVID-19 remains in our community. There is no vaccine for COVID-19. However, it is important that you get the 2020 influenza vaccination which is now available from your GP or pharmacy.

Discuss with your doctor whether you should also have the pneumococcal vaccination against pneumonia, which is recommended for everyone over 65. You should also discuss having a shingles vaccination.

## What if I need urgent assistance that cannot be provided by my current carer?

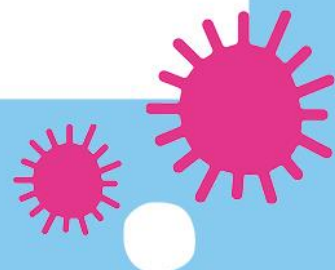
Older Australians can access short term home support services (such as meals or personal care) in an emergency without having had an aged care assessment. Assessments can also be conducted using Telehealth rather than face-to-face where appropriate. Speak with a home care provider about these measures.

## I have a Home Care Package - what does this mean for me?

Consumers with Home Care Packages have flexibility with how they spend their funds over a wide range of care and services to support to stay safe, healthy and independent in their home.

The Australian Government will ensure home care providers have even greater support to meet the changing needs of clients as the situation unfolds.

With support from the Australian Government, home care providers are working hard to meet people's needs during the crisis.



The services you currently receive through your Home Care Package will continue. However, there may be some changes to the way service is delivered. For example, home care staff may change the way that personal care is done to limit person-to-person touch where possible, or wear masks and gloves where they may not have previously.

If you are concerned about the way your current services are being delivered or would like to make changes to your services because of the COVID-19 outbreak, please contact your provider. You can also speak with your provider about changes to your usual services, such as arranging help to go to the shops or arranging your carer to shop on your behalf.

## What happens if I've spent all the money in my Home Care Package this month?

In emergency situations, if an older Australian has fully allocated their Home Care Package, they may access short term home support services for a range of services including nursing, personal care and meals through the Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP).

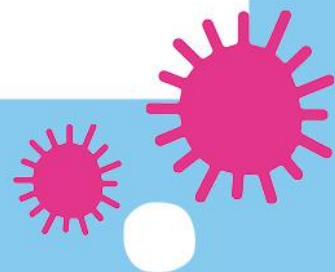
Under existing arrangements for the CHSP, clients whose Home Care Package is fully allocated may, in an emergency (such as when a carer is not able to maintain their caring role), access additional services under the CHSP on a short-term basis. These instances must be time limited, monitored and reviewed. Under this provision, a client with a Home Care Package that is fully allocated who requires urgent services due to COVID-19 may be supported through time-limited CHSP services.

Speak with your home care provider about these measures.

## What if I want to stop receiving my Home Care Package services?

There are multiple reasons why you, or your representative, may ask to stop receiving care and services. If your circumstances have changed due to COVID-19, home care providers can offer to review your care plan and adjust your package of care and services.

Home care providers have an ongoing responsibility to prevent and control infection and detail their actions to manage COVID-19. If you are concerned about exposure to COVID-19, please discuss your concerns with your provider. There are resources available to support general discussions about COVID-19, including appropriate use of surgical masks available here: <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/collections/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-resources>



Providers can offer for you to suspend, or 'take leave' from your package. You need to let your provider know the date that your leave starts. This does not have to be in writing, but your provider must record the dates. Your provider must:

- not deliver services during the period you have taken leave but must start them again when you return; and
- tell you about any changes to your home care fees and the costs charged to your Home Care Package.

## I receive care through the Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP) - what does this mean for me?

Like the Home Care Package program, the Australian Government will ensure CHSP providers have extra support to meet the changing needs and increased demand of clients during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Generally, most of the services you currently receive through your CHSP service provider will continue. However there may be some changes to the way services are delivered and their frequency. For example, CHSP staff may change the way that personal care is done to limit person-to-person touch where possible, while transport providers may limit the number of trips they offer to just essential services (e.g. trips for medical appointments). The Government has requested that some services, such as face-to-face Social Support Group activities, cease entirely to help prevent the spread of the virus through the community.

If you are concerned about the way your current services are being delivered or would like to make changes to your services because of the COVID-19 outbreak, please contact your provider. You can also speak with your provider about changes to your usual services, such as arranging help to go to the shops, getting groceries or meals delivered to you or arranging your carer to shop on your behalf.

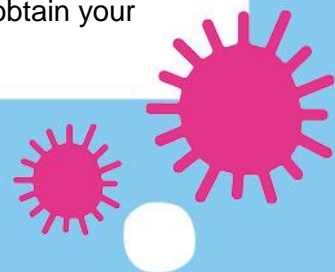
If you want to reduce your CHSP services, make sure you discuss your options with your service provider to ensure you remain safe at home.

## If I need medicines, how will I be able to access them?

Pharmacies are an essential service and will remain open. If you need to collect prescriptions you can leave you home to do so.

However, the Australian Government has created new measures to allow prescription medications to be home delivered to reduce potential exposure to COVID-19. It is also possible in some cases to obtain a continuing supply of your usual medications if you are unable to get a prescription from your GP.

Contact your local pharmacy to find out how you can use these options to safely obtain your medications without leaving home.



## Can I still have contact with friends and family?

The Australian Government has asked that everyone stay at home and limit their contact with others unless it is for essential purposes. This is particularly important for older people. The new restrictions are in place to protect all Australians and especially those at a higher risk from COVID-19. These restrictions are difficult for many of us, but are essential to controlling the impact of the virus. Even though you may not be able to see your family and friends in person, it is really important that you stay in touch with them. Phone calls, video chats through programs like FaceTime and Skype, and emails are a great way to stay connected.

Reaching out to family, friends and neighbours is just as important for your health as protecting yourself from contracting coronavirus.

All Australians are working together to beat this virus and many in the community are willing to offer assistance.

The Australian Government is providing additional funding to the Community Visitors Scheme (CVS). The CVS is a free service that aims to provide friendship and companionship to older people receiving aged care services and help develop social connections.

To find out how you can access the CVS, speak to your facility or contact My Aged Care by phoning 1800 200 422 or logging on to [www.myagedcare.gov.au](http://www.myagedcare.gov.au)

If you regularly visit someone living with dementia or another cognitive impairment, considering other ways of maintaining social contact will help reassure individuals who may feel anxious about possible changes to their day to day life. You can also contact the National Dementia Helpline on 1800 100 500.

For additional support contact:

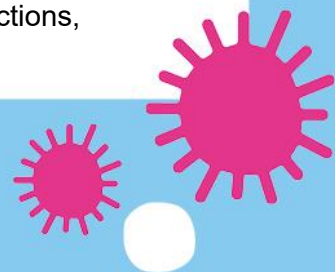
- Beyond Blue 1300 224 636
- Lifeline 13 11 14

## Should I visit my family and friends in a residential aged care facility?

To protect our most vulnerable people, the Australian Government and state and territory governments have put in place restrictions on visits to all residential aged care facilities. If you do visit, the aged care home will have strict procedures you will need to respect and follow. Information on these restrictions are available here:

<https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-information-for-families-and-residents-on-restricted-visits-to-residential-aged-care-facilities>

Some aged care providers are asking all visitors not to visit facilities in order to protect the older people living in the facility. In these cases, there is usually a process the provider has in place for exceptions, such as when a loved one is very unwell. Call the facility to understand what processes are in place. If you have concerns with the facility's actions,



contact the Older Person's Advocacy Network on 1800 700 600 or the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission on 1800 951 822.

If you are not able to visit, consider other ways to stay in touch, including phone and video calls, writing, or filming short videos to share.

## Should I be wearing a mask?

If you are well and you do have to leave your home for essential outings like food shopping, medical appointments or exercise, at this stage you do not have to wear a surgical mask. To protect yourself it is better to practice regular hand hygiene and to stay 1.5 metres away from others, and to stay at home.

## Can I get help if I can't buy things at my local shops?

Meals on Wheels and similar food services have received additional funding to assist, given recommendations for senior Australians to stay at home.

The Government will also purchase 36,000 emergency food supply boxes for vulnerable, older Australians, who are isolated, in crisis, and don't have their usual supports in place to assist them with access to basic food and groceries.

The Government is increasing the flexibility and speed of access to home support services for critical services like meals and shopping. These CHSP services can be accessed immediately and without an assessment for six weeks, or can be accessed if the client is on an interim Home Care package.

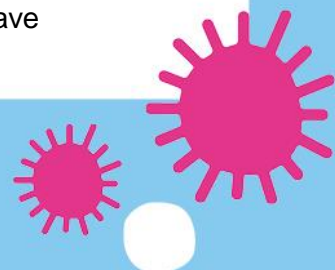
To access these services contact the My Aged Care call centre on 1800 200 422 or contact a local service provider directly.

Some supermarkets have special arrangements for older people. Please contact your local supermarket directly for more information. For more advice on grocery shopping, please visit [www.cota.org.au/covid19](http://www.cota.org.au/covid19).

## I received an email/SMS/phone call about COVID-19 from someone I don't trust – is it a scam?

Unfortunately, there have been multiple reports of scams related to COVID-19. For the most accurate and up-to-date information on COVID-19, please rely on Australian Government material such as this fact sheet.

If you receive communication that you think may be a scam, delete the messages. Do not open any attachments, and do not click on any links. If you think someone may have accessed your financial information, contact your bank immediately.





For the most up-to-date information on scams in Australia, please visit [www.staysmartonline.gov.au](http://www.staysmartonline.gov.au) or call 1300 292 371.

## What should I do about travel or events that I have planned?

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted global travel to an unprecedented extent. A international travel ban is in place for all Australians. You will not be able to depart Australia to travel overseas <https://covid19.homeaffairs.gov.au>

For information on overseas travel, visit: <https://www.smartraveller.gov.au/crisis/covid-19-and-travel>

Australians have been advised to stay at home and cancel any non-essential travel. Some states and territories have issued restrictions that may prevent you from travelling interstate.

If you have a domestic holiday planned, you should approach your travel or accommodation provider to see if they are prepared to offer a refund, replacement service or voucher. If your travel is cancelled the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) expects that you will receive a refund or other remedy, such as a credit note or voucher, in most circumstances. For more information, please go to [www.accc.gov.au/consumers/consumer-rights-guarantees/covid-19-coronavirus-information-for-consumers](http://www.accc.gov.au/consumers/consumer-rights-guarantees/covid-19-coronavirus-information-for-consumers).

Due to the Australian Government's ban on non-essential gatherings, events across Australia have been cancelled or postponed.

If you have purchased tickets to a cancelled event, you will receive a refund or other remedy. For more information, please go to [www.accc.gov.au/consumers/consumer-rights-guarantees/covid-19-coronavirus-information-for-consumers](http://www.accc.gov.au/consumers/consumer-rights-guarantees/covid-19-coronavirus-information-for-consumers).

## More information

For the latest advice, information and resources, go to [www.health.gov.au](http://www.health.gov.au) or [www.healthdirect.gov.au/coronavirus](http://www.healthdirect.gov.au/coronavirus). The phone number of your state or territory public health agency is available at [www.health.gov.au/state-territory-contacts](http://www.health.gov.au/state-territory-contacts).

Call the National Coronavirus Help Line on 1800 020 080. It operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. If you require translating or interpreting services, call 131 450.

For further information please contact:

- COTA at [www.cota.org.au/covid-19](http://www.cota.org.au/covid-19) or speak to your state or territory COTA representative <http://www.cota.org.au/get-involved/visit-stateor-territory-cota>
- National Seniors Australia at <https://nationalseniors.com.au/news/latest/coronavirus-national-seniors-ceo-update> or call 1300 765 050
- OPAN at [www.opan.com.au](http://www.opan.com.au) or call 1800 700 600
- Dementia Australia at [www.dementia.org.au](http://www.dementia.org.au) or call 1800 100 500.

If you have concerns about your health, speak to your doctor.

