

Staying in touch with loved ones in nursing homes and long-term care facilities



In the United States, there are more than 40 million family caregivers, many of whom may be caring for loved ones who may be living in nursing homes or other long-term care facilities. To protect those who are most at risk of complications from the disease caused by the coronavirus, COVID-19, health officials have announced strict rules for some facilities with vulnerable older residents. It can be frustrating and hard when you can't see a loved one face-to-face — a fact that so many family members with loved ones in assisted living or nursing home facilities are discovering during the coronavirus outbreak.

Here are 5 tips from our recent Tele-town Hall and from content on aarp.org/coronavirus on how to stay connected to your loved ones:

- 1. Provide facilities with your most up-to-date emergency contact information.**
This ensures the facilities can contact you easily, and that facilities can get you all updates about your loved one or the facility at large. Ask what the facility is doing to update families. Read all information that the facility sends out; these may describe systems that have been put in place to help facilitate virtual visits or phone calls.
- 2. Communicate verbally with your loved one and by video call, if possible.**
The simplest thing to do is, of course, to use the phone and check in routinely. Think about how you can participate in mutual activities. If you find the conversation struggling a bit, play a game of trivia, work on a crossword puzzle together, sing songs, read poetry or other materials. Watch a TV show at the same time and discuss. For those who are more technologically advanced, consider a video call via various platforms such as FaceTime, Messenger, Skype, Facebook, Zoom, etc. Ask the facility if they can make available and facilitate a video call or at least a phone call.

RESOURCES

Find your state's Long-Term Care Ombudsman to voice concerns about care issues in a facility:
https://theconsumervoice.org/get_help

The Eldercare Locator is a public service of the U.S. Administration on Aging connecting you to services for older adults and their families.
Call **1-800-677-1116** or visit eldercare.acl.gov

For the latest coronavirus news and advice, go to:
aarp.org/coronavirus

3. Appoint one member of the family to be the liaison with the facility.

Also, find out who the main point of contact is at the facility and the best number to call so that you can stay updated on how your loved one is managing. Ask specific questions, things like, are they getting help to walk around as appropriate? Are they eating their meals? What kind of activities are offered? If a care conference is scheduled, ask the facility to keep the scheduled time and hold it over the phone. We know they're busy, but it's imperative that you remain linked as a caregiver and part of the care team.

4. Utilize your family council as a way to communicate with the facility and advocate for residents.

If your facility doesn't have a family council, gather contact information for family members of other residents at the facility and create an email group to share information and use your collective voice for advocacy. Invite facility staff to present information about virus protection/response and infection control at a virtual family council meeting.

5. Send cheerful cards and notes, not only to your loved ones, but to other residents and staff as well.

Handwritten cards and letters are more special than ever, perhaps because electronic communication is increasingly supplanting them. Recipients can display the cards and re-read correspondence to remind themselves that you care. Your loved one can perhaps also write back to you and your family!

6. Support the facility staff and work together.

Facilities might be short staffed and dealing with new operating procedures, and this is a hard time for them as well. Staff at nursing homes and assisted living centers are on the front lines of the coronavirus outbreak, caring for your loved ones and their own families every day. Thank them for their care, and your loved one also might want to express their appreciation too. Talk together about what they might want to give or what they see as a need for staff. Talk with staffers about what they need or are allowed to receive.

Raise concerns about care and rights violations with facility administration and with the long-term care ombudsman program.

Complaints can also be filed with the state Department of Health, although due to [new guidance from CMS](#), follow up will likely be delayed if not in one of the priority areas for survey.