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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Coronavirus

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Seniors are the most vulnerable to coronavirus. You can help protect them.

By **Lateshia Beachum**

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PLEASE NOTE

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Older generations face a potentially life-threatening risk if infected with the novel [coronavirus](#), which has caused deaths of 60-plus-year-olds stretching across the cities of China to the metropolises of Italy and now the United States.

French President Emmanuel Macron advised his citizens to limit their visits to retirement homes last week, and Italy's government has limited access to older people in nursing homes in an effort to keep from exposing them to infection. On Tuesday, nursing home and assisted-living establishment leaders announced that they will start screening relatives, staff and government officials for visits and telling nonessential guests, which could include family members, to stay away to curtail the spread of the virus, [the Boston Globe reported](#).

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The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advised that people older than 80 with major illnesses have the greatest risk and should take extra precautions.

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We spoke with infectious disease and geriatric-care specialists about the steps that can be taken to keep older people healthy in the face of coronavirus.

Respect the rules

If a loved one resides at a facility that is barring visitors, it's in their best interest to abide by the facility's rules.

A lockdown is standard protocol for many skilled-care facilities during flu season, said Deborah Dunn, president of the Gerontological Advanced Practice Nurses Association.

Such procedures could entail a sign warning against visits from people experiencing flu symptoms, increased cleaning of surfaces or requirements for staff to monitor their own temperature to avoid spreading germs. These methods shield residents from potential viral danger as well as the public.

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For covid-19, the CDC is also recommending that long-term-care facilities have employees dedicated to caring for covid-19-positive patients and to assess the respiratory health of new residents.

One of the main concerns about caring for vulnerable populations amid coronavirus, in comparison to the flu, is that there are no vaccines to fight the new virus, and no drugs to treat those who become infected, she said.

Most epidemiologists agree that an effective and safe vaccine is probably a year or more away, despite President Trump's claims that he has heard that something could arrive sooner. Present treatment for covid-19 patients mainly consists of providing fluids, giving medicine to alleviate fever and supplying supplemental oxygen in severe cases, according to a Harvard Health Publishing report.

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“When you don’t have the fix, you need to do health protection and promotion,” said Dunn, adding that it’s probably in your loved one’s best interest that you don’t visit them while you’re sick and that you practice some kind of social distancing from them when you do.

Rethink your care plans

More than 1 million people live in nursing homes, and more than 800,000 people call residential care communities home, according to the CDC.

As coronavirus continues to prove difficult to contain, some have wondered whether they should remove older relatives from these communities out of fear that the residences could become the next Life Care Center of Kirkland, Wash.

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Rehousing a loved one is a very serious decision that requires an individualized approach based on a person's care needs. It's a choice that can carry severe consequences, said Michelle Moccia, program director of Michigan's first senior emergency center and past president of GAPNA.

"Do they have the ability to take care of their loved one at home? They're at a nursing facility because they need extra care," she said.

Should families decide to care for their loved one at home because of a coronavirus outbreak, a care plan needs to be in place to ensure that the same level of medical attention is available.

At-home care isn't a remedy for preventing the spread of the virus, as poor hygiene practices within a home could increase the risk of infection for an older person, experts say.

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Check on your neighbors and introduce technology

Checking on your elderly neighbors is a good Samaritan act in the wake of a coronavirus outbreak, said Bill Hanage, associate professor of epidemiology at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

The CDC advised at-risk populations to stay home as much as possible and to keep in touch with others if covid-19 becomes an issue in their community or if they become infected with the virus.

As toilet tissue and cans of processed food fly off the shelves in big-box stores, places the elderly should avoid, delivering groceries and making sure older, susceptible adults have items they need to survive a quarantine or isolation period could prove valuable.

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Healthy adults can do their part to mitigate the loneliness of the older population by introducing them to technology such as FaceTime, WhatsApp or Skype, and practicing good hand hygiene habits when they visit elderly neighbors, Hanage said.

Older neighbors and churchgoers can also remain healthy if community members properly wash their hands with warm water and soap for 20 seconds during home visits and practice caution about exposing them to any respiratory symptoms they might have, he said.

Social distancing and changing how people greet one another can also be helpful the more people practice the habits, he said. He has started practicing the ebola handshake, which involves touching elbows, and a colleague of his has taken to a Vulcan salute out of precaution.

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‘Don’t panic. Do prepare.’

Neighborhoods and governments across the country should do their best to contain the spread of the virus and to protect vulnerable segments of the population, but those efforts could look different, said Tom Russo. Russo is a professor and chief of infectious disease at the University at Buffalo Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences.

“The pieces of the puzzle we’re missing is the prevalence of infection in society, and if you are asymptomatic, what is the relative risk of spreading the infection,” he said, noting that it’s hard to give a one-size-fits-all course of action for caring for older people.

For Hanage, his motto, which he has pinned to his Twitter page, has become: “Don’t panic. Do prepare.” He suggests others consider doing the same.

Coronavirus: What you need to read

Updated March 24, 2020

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