



22 April 2020

## Important information for residential aged care providers from the Chief Clinical Advisor

### Subject: Screening of people entering residential aged care facilities

#### *Preventing viral exposure as the first line of defence*

In the absence of a vaccine for COVID-19, preventing exposure is the single most important step that any of us can take to protect ourselves and others from contracting this virus.

In light of evidence that older people are more susceptible to contracting and being seriously affected by COVID-19, a highly precautionary approach has been adopted across the aged care sector in responding to the pandemic, based on the latest and best medical advice. This approach includes restricting visitors' access to residential aged care services, and should also involve screening visitors and staff on entry to residential facilities.

#### *What restrictions apply to visitors?*

The Commonwealth and state and territory governments have put in place restrictions to protect residents and workers in residential aged care facilities. These restrictions include legal requirements with regard to entry into and visitors to residential aged care facilities, including specific requirements in relation to influenza vaccinations. The details of visitor restrictions and requirements may differ for each state and territory. Aged care providers are expected to comply with all legal requirements applying nationally and in the jurisdiction/s in which their service/s operate. Providers are also expected to stay up to date with these requirements which are likely to change over time in response to medical advice as circumstances change with the pandemic.<sup>1</sup>

It is vital that residential aged care providers exercise care and compassion in implementing required measures to control visitors' access, keeping consumers at the centre of decision-making. The Commission has provided separate advice about this to the aged care sector, and that [advice can be found on the Commission's website](#).

#### *What does screening of staff and visitors entail?*

Another key strategy to minimise the risk of viral transmission to aged care residents is to screen staff and visitors on entry to the facility.

Routine screening of staff and visitors on entry is strongly recommended for all residential services irrespective of size or location. It is especially important for residential services located in communities (and/or drawing their staff from communities) where there is a local cluster of people with confirmed or suspected COVID-19, or which are considered to be at higher risk of an outbreak.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on visitation restrictions, see the 'Coronavirus (COVID-19) – Restrictions on entry into and visitors to aged care facilities' factsheet on the Commonwealth Department of Health's website at <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/collections/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-resources>



The following information is provided to assist residential services to assess your current arrangements and to take any action necessary to ensure that you have an effective staff and visitor symptom screening process.

**PLEASE NOTE:** *This advice on staff and visitor screening must be read alongside all visitor and staff restrictions and requirements applying nationally and, in the jurisdiction/s in which an approved provider's service/s operate. Providers may need to consider extending the screening questions to ensure the provider's compliance with all relevant visitor and staff restrictions and legal requirements.*

### **Recommendations on screening of people entering residential facilities**

- Ideally, there should be a single point of entry to the facility, with someone tasked to continuously monitor that entry
- Every staff member or visitor arriving at the facility should be asked, at the point of entry, to respond to a standard set of risk screening questions. Services may want to consider giving these questions to each staff member or visitor on a pre-printed form on arrival to assist with understanding and recording
- The screening questions could include:
  - Have you been overseas or travelled on a cruise ship in the last 14 days?
  - Have you been in contact with a confirmed or suspected case of COVID-19 in the last 14 days?
  - Are you in close contact with or caring for someone who is currently unwell?
  - Have you currently or within the last 7 days been unwell or been aware of any of the following symptoms:
    - fever, night sweats or chills
    - cough
    - runny nose
    - sore or scratchy throat
    - shortness of breath

Providers must comply with all relevant visitor restrictions and legal requirements relating to staff and visitors that apply in their jurisdiction, including in relation to influenza immunisation. The above set of screening questions should be amended by a provider as necessary to ensure compliance.

If the answer to any of the screening questions is 'yes', then the staff member or visitor should not enter the premises until the matter has been urgently escalated to and considered by a decision maker at the service

- The staff member or visitor's accurate response to the question about fever can be supported through temperature testing on entry. If temperature testing is used in addition to the standard screening questions, it is recommended that a no-touch method is adopted such as an infra-red temperature detection "gun" device. Even a low-grade fever can indicate possible infection



- The screening responses, if recorded on paper, can also be accompanied by the signature of the staff member or visitor
  
- It is important to note that:
  - A recent negative COVID-19 test does not guarantee that the person is still negative
  - A person with very mild symptoms, or even no symptoms, can be infected or transmitting the virus
  
- Screening of staff and visitors on entry does not replace any of the other essential arrangements and practices that must be in place for all residential aged care services, including rigorous hand hygiene using the correct technique, interpersonal distancing wherever possible, and environmental cleaning with the required cleaning products, thoroughness and frequency.

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