Caregiver’s Corner

Hugs May Be Off Limits, but You Can Still Enjoy Loving Quality Time With Mom or Dad

Daniel Haimowitz, MD, FACP, CMD, talks about how you can safely enjoy visits with your loved ones in a nursing home and help prevent the spread of COVID-19 or other infections.

These days we’re all longing to hug, hold hands, and kiss our family and friends hello and goodbye. If you have a loved one in a post-acute or long-term care facility, the administration and staff there want you to be able to visit and to help you stay connected and engaged with your loved one. But they also want to keep their residents and everyone else safe, and they have federal and state regulations they need to follow.

As of September 2020, there are still many uncertainties about the COVID-19 pandemic — where it will go and how it will impact your visits. However, there are some basic recommendations regarding safety that will help you. Here are a few key points:

• To date, more than 30 states have authorized nursing homes to allow visits, but under strict rules for physical distancing, monitoring, and hygiene.
• The government is encouraging nursing homes to continue prohibiting any visitation until they have gone at least 28 days without a new COVID-19 case originating on site.
• Nursing homes are encouraged to meet standards that include a decline in cases in the surrounding area, the ability to provide all residents and staff with weekly COVID-19 tests, and adequate supplies of personal protective equipment (PPE) and cleaning and disinfecting products.

When asked to wear a mask or follow other rules during your visit, please understand that these temporary restrictions are needed for your loved one’s safety.

The state or county Department of Health can give you information about the current regulations. The facility may also be able to give you good advice and suggestions.

These efforts are all designed to promote safety and keep people from getting sick. Remember that COVID-19 is a very contagious virus, and you can spread it to others if you are sick or even if you have the virus but no signs or symptoms.

• Check with the facility in advance to find out what their rules and guidelines are. You will probably have to call ahead of time to schedule your visit.
• If you want to bring a gift or food for your loved one, check to see if this is okay and what, if any, limitations there are.
• When you go to visit your loved one and the facility requires a temperature check, asks about your symptoms and potential exposure, and mandates that you wear a mask, please be patient and cooperative.
• Understand that you won’t be able to hug or maybe even touch your loved one. You may have to visit outside (weather permitting) or inside with a plastic/glass barrier between you. You will need to follow safety guidance such as wearing a mask and keeping a six-foot distance from your loved one. It also is important to have hand sanitizer and/or antibacterial wipes handy.

If in-person visits aren’t possible, talk to the facility about other options, such as arranging video meetings or visits through the window. These efforts can help keep you engaged with your loved one until you can resume regular, face-to-face visits.

It can be frustrating not to be able to spend time with your loved one. Understand that if the facility has very restrictive rules, it is only because they want to protect both of you. They want everyone to be safe and healthy — and studies show that these restrictions work.

We all hope the day will come soon when you can enjoy a “normal” visit. In the meantime, work with the facility to find the best, safest ways for you to enjoy visits and interactions. Remember, we’re all in this together!

Questions to Ask Your Provider

• What can I do to keep my loved one safe during the visit?
• Can I bring my dog to visit mom? How about a book, a box of bath salts, a bouquet of flowers, or a new shirt?

What You Can Do

• Follow all of the facility’s rules.
• Follow guidance from your state/local Department of Health to protect yourself and others in the community from the coronavirus.
• Plan your visits and do everything possible to make them fun as well as safe.
• Get an influenza vaccine, and talk to your practitioner about having your loved one vaccinated.

For More Information

• Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, “Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) on Nursing Home Visitation,” June 23, 2020: https://go.cms.gov/3ipqo3n

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