

Protecting the elderly in long-term care facilities from the risks of COVID-19

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A new report calls for measures to protect elderly people in long-term care facilities and their caregivers who are particularly vulnerable to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Elderly people in long-term care facilities are at high risk of dying from COVID-19 and the risk of transmission of the virus is also especially high at these residences.

Writing in the *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*, the authors emphasize that being vigilant about the health of the elderly in long-term care is essential not only for their health, but also to protect the healthcare system from becoming overwhelmed by severe COVID-19 cases.

Lead author William Gardner, Professor of Epidemiology at the University of Ottawa, Canada said: "If COVID-19 sweeps through a single long-term care facility, this surge in caseload could overwhelm local hospital capacity. Local hospitals may already be under severe strain due to an influx of coronavirus patients during the current pandemic."

In response to the pandemic many long-term care facilities have adopted strict new access and visitation restrictions to protect residents from infection. But locking down long-term healthcare facilities, possibly for several months, raises other concerns.

"A lack of visits from family and friends will increase the isolation of elderly residents of long-term care facilities. Unfortunately, isolation will also increase their vulnerability to abuse and neglect," said Gardner. "If we do not watch closely, many [elderly people](#) might be effectively abandoned as the outbreak continues."

The authors emphasize the urgent need for new measures to protect elderly residents of long-term facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. They recommend that:

- Long-term care facilities should be priority sites for COVID-19 testing and personal protective equipment.
- Policies should be developed to ensure that long-term care facilities remain adequately staffed and that infection control protocols are closely followed.
- To protect residents and staff, supervision of [long-term care facilities](#) should remain a priority during the pandemic.

The authors also emphasize that the fewer people who get infected in the general population, the lower the risk of infection for long-term care residents. Similarly, the fewer in the [general population](#) who get hospitalized, the more capacity will be available for [long-term care](#) residents.

"The most important thing that we can all do to help protect these [vulnerable groups](#) is to minimise [disease transmission](#) by following guidance from public health officials on handwashing and social distancing," said Gardner.

More information: William Gardner et al, The Coronavirus and the Risks to the Elderly in Long-Term Care, *Journal of Aging & Social Policy* (2020).
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