Holiday Considerations for Long-Term Care Facility Residents and their Families

November 11, 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced everyone to face a number of unusual challenges this year, and the holiday season presents yet another. While it is natural to want to continue lifelong traditions and celebrate holidays with those close to us, and there are many mental health benefits of doing that, persons living in long-term care facilities (LTCFs) and their families need to carefully consider all the options before leaving the facility to join gatherings of family and friends this holiday season. Gatherings of people present a potential risk of exposure to COVID-19, and the risk for persons living in LTCFs is not only for their own health but also the health of other residents if they bring the virus back into the facility. The risks and benefits of leaving the facility for holiday gatherings in the midst of a COVID-19 pandemic must be weighed carefully.

Factors to consider when making decisions about joining holiday celebrations:

- Is leaving the facility allowed by facility policy? What are the requirements for leaving and returning? Some facilities might not allow residents to leave and instead establish ways for families to celebrate more safely together within the LTCF. Some might require COVID-19 testing before leaving or upon return to the facility. Many would require a 14-day quarantine when the resident returns.
- What is the resident's individual health status? What does their doctor recommend? All residents of LTCFs are considered to be at increased risk of severe illness from COVID-19 based on their age and residence in a communal setting. Additional underlying health conditions can increase individual risk even more.
- What is the rate of COVID-19 in the community? Be aware that the risk of disease is higher in communities where more people have the disease. For up to date information on COVID-19 in Virginia, see the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) website.
- Can the resident be protected in the home where the holiday celebration will be hosted? Will people be there who might be sick or have a high risk of exposure? Mask wearing and six-foot social distancing are the best ways to prevent infection. Can those be maintained and the celebration still enjoyed? Short visits with limited numbers of people present are safer than longer visits with more people.
- What is the cost to the LTCF if the resident becomes ill after the visit? The facility would have to set up a special COVID-19 care unit with separate staff members, use of PPE would increase, and testing would have to scale up for staff and residents. This is a burden for the facility management, staff, and residents to bear.

Obviously, there are many factors to consider. **Visits in the facility, outdoors if weather permits, or by the use of technology are safer alternatives.** If a resident does choose to leave a LTCF for a holiday, VDH recommends the following steps to make the holidays safer. **In addition to the guidance below, residents, families, and facilities should follow relevant guidance from CMS and CDC.**

Step 1: Minimize your risk before you leave

- Limit interactions with others for 14 days before departure. Encourage your family members to do the same.
- Wear masks (also called cloth face coverings) whenever you interact with another person, especially if you are less than 6 feet apart, and even if you are outside.
- Get your annual flu shot at least 2 weeks before you leave the facility. Encourage your family members to get the flu shot, too.
- Know what to expect at the holiday gathering and make a plan for how you will limit your contact with others while there. Think ahead about where you will sit and how you might limit contact with others. Check in with your hosts to be sure no one has an acute respiratory illness, and that no one has had close contact with a person with COVID-19 diagnosed within the past 14 days.

Step 2: Minimize your risk of exposure to COVID-19

- Wear masks whenever you interact with another person, as noted above.
- Minimize interactions by spending short periods of time with smaller groups of people, outside if possible, and avoiding long, indoor gatherings.
- Maintain as much distance between yourself and others. Avoid hugs and handshakes.
- Wash your hands often.
- Anyone (you or your family or friends) who develops any COVID-19 symptoms, even if symptoms are very mild, should isolate from others and get tested as soon as possible.

Step 3: Minimize the risk of spreading COVID-19 when you are back at your facility

- Follow any special protocol your facility has in place that outlines actions you are expected to take when you come back after being away.
- Quarantining in your room for 14 days after returning is the safest option to prevent disease spread.
- You might be asked to get tested for COVID-19 about one week after returning to the facility to help identify any exposures or illness you may have picked up while you were away.
- Continue to participate in the facility's program to monitor residents for any signs or symptoms of COVID-19. If you start to have any of the symptoms, alert facility staff, isolate from others, and get tested.