

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES
Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services
7500 Security Boulevard, Mail Stop C2-21-16
Baltimore, Maryland 21244-1850



Center for Clinical Standards and Quality/Survey & Certification Group

Ref: QSO-20-39-NH

REVISED 09/23/2022

DATE: September 17, 2020
TO: State Survey Agency Directors
FROM: Director
Survey and Certification Group
SUBJECT: Nursing Home Visitation - COVID-19 (**REVISED**)

Memorandum Summary

- CMS is committed to continuing to take critical steps to ensure America's healthcare facilities are prepared to respond to the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Public Health Emergency (PHE).
- **Visitation Guidance:** CMS is issuing new guidance for visitation in nursing homes during the COVID-19 PHE.
- **Visitation is allowed for all residents at all times.**
- **Updated guidance for face coverings and masks during visits.**
- **Removed vaccination status from the guidance.**

Background

Nursing homes have been severely impacted by COVID-19, with outbreaks causing high rates of infection, [morbidity, and mortality](#). The vulnerable nature of the nursing home population combined with the inherent risks of congregate living in a healthcare setting have required aggressive efforts to limit COVID-19 exposure and to prevent the spread of COVID-19 within nursing homes.

In March 2020, CMS issued memorandum [QSO 20-14-NH](#) providing guidance to facilities on restricting visitation of all visitors and non-essential healthcare personnel, except for certain compassionate care situations, such as an end-of-life situation.

While CMS guidance has focused on protecting nursing home residents from COVID-19, we recognize that physical separation from family and other loved ones has taken a physical and emotional toll on residents and their loved ones. Residents may feel socially isolated, leading to increased risk for depression, anxiety, and expressions of distress. Residents living with cognitive impairment or other disabilities may find visitor restrictions and other ongoing changes related to COVID-19 confusing or upsetting. CMS understands that nursing home residents derive value from the physical, emotional, and spiritual support they receive through visitation from family and friends. In light of this, CMS is

revising the guidance regarding visitation in nursing homes during the COVID-19 PHE. The information contained in this memorandum supersedes and replaces previously issued guidance and recommendations regarding visitation.

Since the release of QSO memorandum 20-39-NH on September 17, 2020, COVID-19 vaccines have received full approval and Emergency Use Authorization from the Food and Drug Administration. [Millions of Vaccinations](#) have since been administered to nursing home residents and staff, and these vaccines have been shown to help prevent symptomatic SARS-CoV-2 infection (i.e., COVID-19). In addition, [CMS requires nursing homes](#) to educate residents and staff on the risks and benefits of the vaccines, offer to administer the vaccine, and report resident and staff vaccination data to CDC's National Healthcare Safety Network. CMS now posts this information on the CMS [COVID-19 Nursing Home Data](#) website along with other COVID-19 data, such as the weekly number of COVID-19 cases and deaths. **Therefore, CMS, in conjunction with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), is updating its visitation guidance accordingly, but emphasizing the importance of maintaining infection prevention practices.**

We note that the reason for visitation restrictions during the COVID-19 PHE were to mitigate the opportunity for visitors to introduce COVID-19 into the nursing home. Per 42 CFR § 483.10(f)(4), a resident has the right to receive visitors of his or her choosing at the time of his or her choosing, and in a manner that does not impose on the rights of another resident, such as a clinical or safety restriction (see 42 CFR § 483.10(f)(4)(v)). In other words, while all residents have a right to visitation, fully open and unrestricted visitation posed a clinical health and safety risk to other residents during this PHE, and therefore, it was reasonable to place limits on visitation. However, current nursing home COVID-19 data shows approximately 87% of residents and 83% of staff are fully vaccinated as of February 2022.

On [November 4, 2021](#), CMS issued a regulation requiring that all nursing home staff be vaccinated against COVID-19 as a requirement for participating in the Medicare and Medicaid programs. This requirement also applies to nearly all Medicare and Medicaid-certified providers and suppliers. CMS will continue to monitor vaccination and infection rates, including the effects of COVID-19 variants on nursing home residents, which have recently caused the number of cases to slightly increase. However, at this time, continued restrictions on this vital resident's right are no longer necessary.

We acknowledge that there *may* still *be* concerns associated with visitation, however, adherence to the core principles of COVID-19 infection prevention mitigates these concerns. Furthermore, we remind stakeholders that, per 42 CFR § 483.10(f)(2), the resident has the right to make choices about aspects of his or her life in the facility that are significant to the resident. We further note that residents may deny or withdraw consent for a visit at any time, per 42 CFR § 483.10(f)(4)(ii) and (iii). Therefore, if a visitor, resident, or their representative is aware of the risks associated with visitation, and the visit occurs in a manner that does not place other residents at risk (e.g., in the resident's room), the resident must be allowed to receive visitors as he/she chooses.

Guidance

Visitation can be conducted through different means based on a facility's structure and residents' needs, such as in resident rooms, dedicated visitation spaces, *and* outdoors. Regardless of how visits are conducted, certain core principles and best practices reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission:

Core Principles of COVID-19 Infection Prevention

- *Facilities should provide guidance (e.g., posted signs at entrances) about recommended actions for visitors who have a positive viral test for COVID-19, symptoms of COVID-19, or have had close contact with someone with COVID-19. Visitors with confirmed COVID-19 infection or compatible symptoms should defer non-urgent in-person visitation until they meet CDC criteria for healthcare settings to end isolation. For visitors who have had close contact with someone with COVID-19 infection, it is safest to defer non-urgent in-person visitation until 10 days after their close contact if they meet criteria described in CDC healthcare guidance (e.g., cannot wear source control).*
- [Hand hygiene](#) (use of alcohol-based hand rub is preferred)
- Face covering or mask (covering mouth and nose) in accordance with CDC [guidance](#)
- Instructional signage throughout the facility and proper visitor education on COVID-19 signs and symptoms, infection control precautions, other applicable facility practices (e.g., use of face covering or mask, specified entries, exits and routes to designated areas, hand hygiene)
- Cleaning and disinfecting high-frequency touched surfaces in the facility often, and designated visitation areas after each visit
- Appropriate staff use of [Personal Protective Equipment \(PPE\)](#)
- Effective cohorting of residents (e.g., separate areas dedicated to COVID-19 care)
- Resident and staff testing conducted as required at 42 CFR § 483.80(h) (see [QSO-20-38-NH](#))

These core principles are consistent with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [guidance](#) for nursing homes, and should be **adhered to at all times**. Additionally, visitation should be person-centered, consider the residents' physical, mental, and psychosocial well-being, and support their quality of life. The risk of transmission can be further reduced through the use of physical barriers (e.g., clear Plexiglass dividers, curtains). Also, nursing homes should enable visits to be conducted with an adequate degree of privacy. Visitors who are unable to adhere to the core principles of infection prevention should not be permitted to visit or should be asked to leave. By following a person-centered approach and adhering to these core principles, visitation can occur safely based on the below guidance.

Outdoor Visitation

Outdoor visits generally pose a lower risk of transmission due to increased space and airflow. For outdoor visits, facilities should create accessible and safe outdoorspaces for visitation, such as in courtyards, patios, or parking lots, including the use of tents, if available. However, weather considerations (e.g., inclement weather, excessively hot or cold temperatures, poor air quality) or an individual resident's health status (e.g., medical condition(s), COVID-19 status, quarantine status) may hinder outdoor visits. When conducting outdoor visitation, all appropriate infection control and prevention practices should be followed.

Indoor Visitation

Facilities must allow indoor visitation at all times and for all residents as permitted under the regulations. While previously acceptable during the PHE, facilities can no longer limit the frequency and length of visits for residents, the number of visitors, or require advance scheduling of visits.

Although there is no limit on the number of visitors that a resident can have at one time, visits should be conducted in a manner that adheres to the core principles of COVID-19 infection prevention and does not increase risk to other residents. *During peak times of visitation and large gatherings (e.g., parties, events) facilities should encourage physical distancing.* Facilities may contact their local health authorities for guidance or direction on how to structure their visitation to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

Face Coverings and *masks* during visits

If the nursing home's county COVID-19 community transmission is **high**, *everyone in a healthcare setting* should wear face coverings or masks.

*If the nursing home's county COVID-19 community transmission is **not high**, the safest practice is for residents and visitors to wear face coverings or masks, however, the facility could choose not to require visitors wear face coverings or masks while in the facility, except during an outbreak. The facility's policies regarding face coverings and masks should be based on recommendations from the [CDC](#), state and local health departments, and individual facility circumstances.*

*Regardless of the community transmission level, residents and their visitors when alone in the resident's room or in a designated visitation area, may choose not to wear face coverings or masks and may choose to have close contact (including touch). Residents (or their representative) and their visitors should be advised of the risks of physical contact prior to the visit. *If a roommate is present during the visit, it is safest for the visitor to wear a face covering or mask.**

Additional information on levels of community transmission is available on the CDC's [COVID-19 Integrated County View](#) webpage.

*NOTE: CDC states that Community **Transmission** is the metric currently recommended to guide select practices in healthcare settings to allow for earlier intervention, before there is strain on the healthcare system, including its workforce, and better protect the vulnerable individuals seeking care in these settings. The **Community Transmission** metric is different than the COVID-19 **Community Level** metric used for non-healthcare settings.*

Nursing homes should use the Community Transmission Level metric not the Community Level metric.

While not recommended, residents who are on transmission-based precautions (TBP) or quarantine can still receive visitors. In these cases, visits should occur in the resident's room and the resident should wear a well-fitting facemask (if tolerated). Before visiting residents, who are on TBP or quarantine, visitors should be made aware of the potential risk of visiting and precautions necessary in order to visit the resident. Visitors should adhere to the core principles of infection prevention. Facilities may offer well-fitting facemasks or other appropriate PPE, if available; however,

facilities are not required to provide PPE for visitors.

Indoor Visitation during an Outbreak Investigation

An outbreak investigation is initiated when a *single* new *case* of COVID-19 occurs among residents or staff *to determine if others have been exposed*. To swiftly detect cases, we remind facilities to adhere to CMS regulations and guidance for COVID-19 testing, including routine staff testing, testing of individuals with symptoms, and outbreak testing.

When a new case of COVID-19 among residents or staff is identified, a facility should immediately (*but not earlier than 24 hours after the exposure, if known*) begin outbreak testing in accordance with CMS [QSO 20-38-NH REVISED](#) and [CDC guidelines](#).

While it is safer for visitors not to enter the facility during an outbreak investigation, visitors must still be allowed in the facility. Visitors should be made aware of the potential risk of visiting during an outbreak investigation and adhere to the core principles of infection prevention. If residents or their representative would like to have a visit during an outbreak investigation, they should wear face coverings or masks during visits and visits should ideally occur in the resident's room. *While an outbreak investigation is occurring*, facilities should limit visitor movement in the facility. For example, visitors should not walk around different halls of the facility. Rather, they should go directly to the resident's room or designated visitation area. *Also, visitors should physically distance themselves from other residents and staff, when possible*. Facilities may contact their local health authorities for guidance or direction on how to structure their visitation to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission during an outbreak investigation.

Visitor Testing and Vaccination

While not required, we encourage facilities in counties with high levels of community transmission to offer testing to visitors, if feasible. If facilities do not offer testing, they should encourage visitors to be tested on their own before coming to the facility (e.g., within 2–3 days).

CMS strongly encourages all visitors to become vaccinated and facilities should educate and also encourage visitors to become vaccinated. Visitor testing and vaccination can help prevent the spread of COVID-19 and facilities may ask about a visitor's vaccination status, however, **visitors are not required to be tested or vaccinated** (or show proof of such) as a condition of visitation. If the visitor declines to disclose their vaccination status, the visitor should wear a face covering or mask at all times. This also applies to representatives of the Office of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman and protection and advocacy systems, as described below.

Compassionate Care Visits

Compassionate care visits are allowed at all times. Previously during the PHE, there were some scenarios where residents should only have compassionate care visits. However, visitation is now allowed at all times for all residents, in accordance with CMS regulations. Therefore, we believe there are few scenarios when visitation should be limited only to compassionate care visits. In the event a scenario arises that would limit visitation for a resident (e.g., a resident is severely immunocompromised and the number of visitors the resident is exposed to needs to be kept to a minimum), compassionate care visits would still be allowed at all times. CMS expects these scenarios to be rare events.

Required Visitation

Facilities shall not restrict visitation without a reasonable clinical or safety cause, consistent with 42 CFR § 483.10(f)(4)(v). In previous nursing home visitation guidance during the PHE, CMS outlined some scenarios related to COVID-19 that would constitute a clinical or safety reason for limited visitation. However, there are no longer scenarios related to COVID-19 where visitation should be limited, except for certain situations when the visit is limited to being conducted in the resident's room or the rare event that visitation is limited to compassionate care. Therefore, a nursing home **must** facilitate in-person visitation consistent with the applicable CMS regulations, which can be done by applying the guidance stated above. Failure to facilitate visitation, per 42 CFR § 483.10(f)(4), which states "The resident has a right to receive visitors of his or her choosing at the time of his or her choosing, subject to the resident's right to deny visitation when applicable, and in a manner that does not impose on the rights of another resident," would constitute a potential violation and the facility would be subject to citation and enforcement actions.

As stated above, we acknowledge that there are still risks associated with visitation and COVID-19. However, the risks are reduced by adhering to the core principles of COVID-19 infection prevention. Furthermore, we remind facilities and all stakeholders that, per 42 CFR § 483.10(f)(2), residents have the right to make choices about aspects of his or her life in the facility that are significant to the resident. Visitors, residents, or their representative should be made aware of the potential risk of visiting and necessary precautions related to COVID-19 in order to visit the resident. However, if a visitor, resident, or their representative is aware of the risks associated with visitation, and the visit occurs in a manner that does not place other residents at risk (e.g., in the resident's room), the resident must be allowed to receive visitors as he/she chooses.

Access to the Long-Term Care Ombudsman

As stated in previous CMS guidance [QSO-20-28-NH \(revised\)](#), regulations at 42 CFR § 483.10(f)(4)(i)(C) require that a Medicare and Medicaid-certified nursing home provide representatives of the Office of the State Long-Term Care Ombudsman with immediate access to any resident. If an ombudsman is planning to visit a resident who is in TBP or quarantine in a nursing home in a county where the level of community transmission is high in the past 7 days, the resident and ombudsman should be made aware of the potential risk of visiting, and the visit should take place in the resident's room. We note that representatives of the Office of the Ombudsman should adhere to the core principles of COVID-19 infection prevention as described above. If the resident or the Ombudsman program requests alternative communication in lieu of an in-person visit, facilities must, at a minimum, facilitate alternative resident communication with the Ombudsman program, such as by phone or through the use of other technology. Nursing homes are also required under 42 CFR § 483.10(h)(3)(ii) to allow the Ombudsman to examine the resident's medical, social, and administrative records as otherwise authorized by State law.

Federal Disability Rights Laws and Protection & Advocacy (P&A) Programs

42 CFR § 483.10(f)(4)(i)(E) and (F) requires the facility to allow immediate access to a resident by any representative of the protection and advocacy systems, as designated by the state, and as established under the Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 2000 (DD Act), and of the agency responsible for the protection and advocacy system for individuals with a mental disorder (established under the Protection and Advocacy for Mentally Ill Individuals Act of 2000). P&A programs authorized under the DD Act protect the rights of individuals with

developmental and other disabilities and are authorized to “investigate incidents of abuse and neglect of individuals with developmental disabilities if the incidents are reported to the system or if there is probable cause to believe the incidents occurred.” 42 U.S.C. § 15043(a)(2)(B). Under its federal authorities, representatives of P&A programs are permitted access to all facility residents, which includes “the opportunity to meet and communicate privately with such individuals regularly, both formally and informally, by telephone, mail and in person.” 42 CFR § 51.42(c); 45 CFR § 1326.27.

If the P&A is planning to visit a resident who is in TBP or quarantine in a county where the level of community transmission is high in the past 7 days, the resident and P&A representative should be made aware of the potential risk of visiting and the visit should take place in the resident’s room.

Additionally, each facility must comply with federal disability rights laws such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 29 U.S.C. § 794 (Section 504) and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, 42 U.S.C. §§ 12101 et seq. (ADA).

For example, if communicating with individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing, it is recommended to use a clear mask or mask with a clear panel. Face coverings should not be placed on anyone who has trouble breathing or is unable to wear a mask due to a disability, or anyone who is unconscious, incapacitated, or otherwise unable to remove the mask without assistance.

In addition, if a resident requires assistance to ensure effective communication (e.g., a qualified interpreter or someone to facilitate communication) and the assistance is not available by onsite staff or effective communication cannot be provided without such entry (e.g., video remote interpreting), the facility must allow the individual entry into the nursing home to interpret or facilitate, with some exceptions. This would not preclude nursing homes from imposing legitimate safety measures that are necessary for safe operations, such as requiring such individuals to adhere to the core principles of COVID-19 infection prevention. Any questions about or issues related to enforcement or oversight of the non-CMS requirements and citations referenced above under this section subject heading should be referred to the HHS Office for Civil Rights (Toll-free: 800-368-1019) (TDD toll-free: 800-537-7697), the Administration for Community Living (202-401-4634), or other appropriate oversight agency.

Entry of Healthcare Workers and Other Providers of Services

All healthcare workers must be permitted to come into the facility as long as they are not subject to a [work exclusion](#) or showing signs or symptoms of COVID-19. In addition to health care workers, personnel educating and assisting in resident transitions to the community should be permitted entry consistent with this guidance. We note that EMS personnel do not need to be screened, so they can attend to an emergency without delay. We remind facilities that all staff, including individuals providing services under arrangement as well as volunteers, should adhere to the core principles of COVID-19 infection prevention and must comply with COVID-19 testing requirements.

Communal Activities, Dining and Resident Outings

While adhering to the core principles of COVID-19 infection prevention, communal activities and dining may occur. Book clubs, crafts, movies, exercise, and bingo are all activities that can be facilitated with alterations to adhere to the guidelines for preventing transmission. The safest approach is for everyone, *particularly those at high risk for severe illness*, to wear a face covering

or mask while in communal areas of the facility. For more information, see the Implement Source Control section of the CDC guidance [“Interim Infection Prevention and Control Recommendations for Healthcare Personnel During the Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) Pandemic.”](#)

Facilities must permit residents to leave the facility as they choose. Should a resident choose to leave, the facility should remind the resident and any individual accompanying the resident to follow all recommended infection prevention practices *such as* wearing a face covering or mask, *especially for those at high risk for severe illness and when community transmission is high, performing* hand hygiene and encouraging those around them to do the same.

Upon the resident’s return, nursing homes should screen residents upon return for signs or symptoms of COVID-19:

- If the resident or family member reports possible close contact to an individual with COVID-19 while outside of the nursing home, *see the CDC’s [guidance](#) for residents who have had close contact for next steps regarding testing and quarantine.*
- If the resident develops signs or symptoms of COVID-19 after the outing, *see the CDC’s [guidance](#) for residents with symptoms of COVID-19.*

In most circumstances, quarantine is not recommended for residents who leave the facility for less than 24 hours (e.g., for medical appointments, community outings with family or friends) except in certain situations, described in the CDC’s [empiric transmission-based precautions](#) guidance.

Residents who leave the facility for 24 hours or longer should generally be managed as a new admission, as recommended by the *CDC in the [Managing admissions and residents who leave the facility](#) section.*

Survey Considerations

State survey agencies and CMS are ultimately responsible for ensuring surveyors are compliant with the applicable expectations. Therefore, LTC facilities are not permitted to restrict access to surveyors based on vaccination status, nor ask a surveyor for proof of his or her vaccination status as a condition of entry. If facilities have questions about the process a state is using to ensure surveyors can enter a facility safely, those questions should be addressed to the State Survey Agency. Surveyors should not enter a facility if they have a positive viral test for COVID-19, signs or symptoms of COVID-19, or currently meet the criteria for quarantine. Surveyors should also adhere to the core principles of COVID-19 infection prevention and adhere to any COVID-19 infection prevention requirements set by federal and state agencies (including Executive Orders).

- For concerns related to resident communication with and access to persons and services inside and outside the facility, surveyors should investigate for non-compliance at 42 CFR § 483.10(b), F550.
- For concerns related to a facility limiting visitors, surveyors should investigate for non-compliance at 42 CFR § 483.10(f)(4), F563.
- For concerns related to ombudsman access to the resident and the resident’s medical record, surveyors should investigate for non-compliance at 42 CFR §§ 483.10(f)(4)(i)(C), F562 and 483.10(h)(3)(ii), F583.
- For concerns related to lack of adherence to infection control practices, surveyors should investigate for non-compliance at 42 CFR § 483.80(a), F880.

Contact: Questions related to this memorandum may be submitted to:
DNH_TriageTeam@cms.hhs.gov.

Effective Date: Immediately. This policy should be communicated with all survey and certification staff, their managers, and the State/CMS Locations within 30 days of this memorandum.

/s/
David R. Wright

cc: Survey Operations Group

September 23, 2022

Nursing Home Visitation - Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

CMS is providing clarification to recent guidance for visitation (see [CMS memorandum QSO-20-39-NH REVISED](#)). While CMS cannot address every aspect of visitation that may occur, we provide additional details about certain scenarios below. However, the bottom line is visitation must be permitted at all times with very limited and rare exceptions, in accordance with residents' rights. In short, nursing homes should enable visitation following these three key points:

- Adhere to the core principles of infection prevention, especially wearing a mask and performing hand hygiene;
- *Encourage physical distancing* during large gatherings; and
- Work with your state or local health department when an outbreak occurs.

States may instruct nursing homes to take additional measures to make visitation safer, while ensuring visitation can still occur. This includes *recommending* that, during visits, residents and visitors wear masks *in accordance with CDC recommendations*. *Masks should be* well-fitting, and preferably those with better protection, such as surgical masks or KN95. States should work with CMS on specific actions related to additional measures they are considering.

1. What is the best way for residents, visitors, and staff to protect themselves from the Omicron variant?

A: The most effective tool to protect anyone from the COVID-19 [Omicron variant](#) (or any version of COVID-19) is to be up-to-date with all recommended COVID-19 vaccine doses. Also, we urge all residents, staff, and visitors to follow the guidelines for preventing COVID-19 from spreading, including wearing a well-fitting mask (preferably those with better protection, such as surgical masks or KN95) while in a nursing home, practicing physical distancing *in large gatherings*, and performing hand hygiene by using an alcohol-based hand rub or soap and water.

2. How should nursing homes address visitation when they expect a high volume of visitors, such as over the holidays?

A: In general, visitation should be allowed for all residents at all times. However, as stated in CMS memorandum [QSO-20-39-NH REVISED](#), *“During peak times of visitation and large gatherings (e.g., parties, events) facilities should encourage physical distancing.”* The facility may restructure the visitation policy, such as asking visitors to schedule their visit at staggered time-slots throughout the day, and/or limiting the number of visitors in the facility or a resident's room at any time, *to reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission*. Note: While these may be strategies used during the holidays or when a high volume of visitors is expected (especially in light of the uncertain impact of the Omicron variant in facilities), we expect these strategies to only be used *to enable* physical distancing. Also, there is no limit on length of visits, in general, as long as the visit poses no risk to or infringes upon other residents' rights.

3. Can visits occur in a resident’s room if they have a roommate?

A: Yes. Ideally an in-room visit would be conducted when the roommate is not present, however if that is not an option, the visit *could* occur in a different area of the facility, occur at a time when the roommate is not in the room, or the visitors should be asked to limit the number of visitors that are in the room at one time. If a visit does occur in the resident’s room and the roommate is present, it is safest for the visitors to wear a face covering or mask. Also, visitors and residents should adhere to the principles of infection control, including wearing a mask and performing frequent hand hygiene.

4. Can a visitor share a meal with or feed the resident they are visiting?

A: Visitors may eat with a resident if the resident (or representative) and the visitor are aware of the risks and adhere to the core principles of infection prevention. Eating in a separate area is preferred, however if that is not possible, then the meal could occur in a common area as long as the visitor wears a mask (*in accordance with [CDC recommendations](#)*), except while eating or drinking.

5. How should nursing homes work with their state or local health department when there is an COVID-19 outbreak?

A: Prior to the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency (PHE), there were occasions when a local or state health department advised a nursing home to pause visitation and new admissions due to a large outbreak of an infectious disease. Consultation with state health departments on how to address outbreaks should still occur. In fact, we remind nursing homes that they are still expected to contact their health department when *responding to COVID-19 transmission within the facility*.

While residents have the right to receive visitors at all times and make choices about aspects of their life in the facility that are significant to them, there may be times when the scope and severity of an outbreak warrants the health department to intervene with the facility’s operations. We expect these situations to be extremely rare and only occur after the facility has been working with the health department to manage and prevent escalation of the outbreak. We also expect that if the outbreak is severe enough to warrant pausing visitation, it would also warrant a pause on accepting new admissions (as long as there is adequate alternative access to care for hospital discharges). For example, in a nursing homes where, despite collaborating with the health department over several days, there continues to be uncontrolled transmission impacting a large number of residents (e.g., more than 30% of residents became infected*), and the health department advised the facility to pause visitation and new admissions temporarily. In this situation, the nursing home would not be out of compliance with CMS’ requirements.

*CMS does not define a specific threshold for what constitutes a large outbreak and this could vary based on facility size or structure. However, we emphasize that any visitation limits should be rare and applied when there are many cases in multiple areas of the facility.

Nursing facilities should continue to consult with state and local health departments when outbreaks occur to determine when modifications to visitation policy would be appropriate. Facilities should document their discussions with the health department, and the actions they took to attempt to control the transmission of COVID-19.

6. Should the facility pause communal activities and dining during an outbreak investigation?

A: *No. Communal activities and dining do not have to be paused during an outbreak, unless directed by the state or local health department. Residents who are on TBP (i.e. isolation or quarantine) should not participate in communal activities and dining until the criteria to discontinue TBP has been met.*

7. Is a resident (not on transmission-based precautions or quarantine) who is unable or unwilling to wear a mask, *when expected based on CDC recommendations*, allowed to attend communal dining and activities?

A: A resident who is unable to wear a mask due to a disability or medical condition may attend communal activities, however they should physically distance from others *during large gatherings*. If possible, facilities should educate the resident on the core principles of infection prevention, such as hand hygiene, physical distancing, cough etiquette, etc. and staff should provide frequent reminders to adhere to infection prevention principles.

A resident who is unable to wear a mask and whom staff cannot prevent having close contact with others should not attend *large gatherings*. To help residents prevent having close contact, such as in the case of a memory care unit, the staff should limit the size of group activities. They should also encourage frequent hand hygiene, assist with maintaining physical distancing as much as possible, and frequently cleaning high-touch surfaces.

If a resident refuses to wear a mask and physically distance from others *during large gatherings*, the facility should educate the resident on the importance of masking and physical distancing, document the education in the resident's medical record, and the resident should not participate in *large gatherings*.

8. How can a long-term care provider coordinate an onsite clinic to provide COVID-19 vaccine and boosters for staff and residents?

A: Many LTC providers have already identified strategies and partnerships to [obtain and administer COVID-19 vaccines for residents and staff](#), including: working with established [LTC partners and retail pharmacy partners](#) or coordinating with state and local health departments. You may request vaccination support from a pharmacy partner enrolled in the [Federal Retail Pharmacy Program](#). If you are having difficulties arranging COVID-19 vaccination for your residents and staff, [contact your state or local health department's immunization program](#) for assistance. If the state or jurisdictional immunization program is unable to connect your LTC setting with a vaccine provider, CDC is available as a safety net support (Contact CDC INFO at 800-232-4636 for additional support).

9. With COVID-19 cases spiking due to the Omicron variant, should facilities continue to permit

visitation?

A: Yes. While CMS is concerned about COVID-19 cases due to the Omicron variant, we're also concerned about the effects of isolation and separation of residents from their loved ones. Earlier in the pandemic we issued guidance for certain limits to visitation, but we've learned a few key things since then. Isolation and limited visitation can be traumatic for residents, resulting in physical and psychosocial decline. So, we know it can lead to worse outcomes for people in nursing homes. Furthermore, we know visitation can occur in a manner that doesn't place other residents at increased risk for COVID-19 by adhering to the practices for infection prevention, such as physical distancing *when in large gatherings*, masking, and frequent hand hygiene. There are also a variety of ways that visitation can be structured to reduce the risk of COVID-19 spreading. So, CMS believes it is critical for residents to receive visits from their friends, family, and loved ones in a manner that does not impose on the rights of another resident. Lastly, as indicated above, facilities should consult with their state or local public health officials, and questions about visitation should be addressed on a case by case basis.

10. Why can a resident choose to have a visit even when COVID-19 cases are increasing?

A: It is important to note that federal regulations explicitly state that residents have the right to make choices about significant aspects of their life in the facility and the right to receive visitors, as long as it doesn't infringe on the rights of other residents (42 CFR 483.10(f)(2) and (4), respectively). In this case, as long as a visit doesn't increase the risk of COVID-19 for other residents (i.e., by using the guidance for conducting safe visits), the resident still has the right to choose to have a visitor. Therefore, if the resident is aware of the risks of the visit, and the visit is conducted in a manner that doesn't increase the risk of COVID-19 transmission for other residents, the visit must still be permitted in accordance with the requirements.

11. Are there any suggestions for how to conduct visits that reduce the risk of COVID-19 transmission?

A: There are ways facilities can and should take extra precautions, such as hosting the visit outdoors, if possible; creating dedicated visitation space indoors; permitting in-room visits when the resident's roommate is not present; and the resident and visitor should wear a well-fitting mask (preferably those with better protection, such as surgical masks or KN95), *in accordance with CDC recommendations*, perform frequent hand-hygiene, and practice physical distancing *when in large gatherings*. Some other recommendations include:

- Offering visitors surgical masks or KN95 masks.
- *Limiting* the visitor's movement in the facility, *during an outbreak*, to only the location of the visit.
- Increasing air-flow and improving ventilation and air quality.
- Cleaning and sanitizing the visitation area after each visit.
- Providing reminders in common areas (e.g., signage) to maintain physical distancing *in large gatherings*, perform hand-hygiene, and wear well-fitting masks.

12. Are there best practices for improving air quality to reduce risks during visitation?

A: Yes, a facility may consider a number of options related to air quality such as:

- Adding [ultraviolet germicidal irradiation \(UVGI\)](#) to the heating ventilation and air conditioning system (HVAC),
- Adding portable room air cleaners with high-efficiency particulate air (HEPA, H-13 or -14) filters to communal areas.
- Ensure proper maintenance of HVAC system to ensure maximum outdoor air intake.

For additional information on air cleaning and disinfecting, see [CDC's Ventilation FAQs](#) or the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating and Air-Conditioning Engineers site on [Filtration and Disinfection](#).

13. What are ways a facility can improve and or manage air flow during visitation?

A: A facility may consider implementing the following:

- The use of a portable fan placed close to an open window could enable ventilation. A portable fan facing towards the window (i.e. facing outside) serves to pull the room and exhaust air to the outside; a fan facing towards the interior of the room (i.e. facing inside) serves to pull in the outdoor air and push it inside the room. Direct the fan discharge towards an unoccupied corner and wall spaces or up above the occupied zone.
- The use of ceiling fans at low velocity and potentially in the reverse-flow direction (so that air is pulled up toward the ceiling), especially when windows are closed.
- Avoid the use of the high-speed settings for any fan.
- Keeping doors to resident rooms or visitation areas closed during visits to control air flow and reducing spread of infection.

For additional information on improving air quality, optimizing air flow and use of barriers, see the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) site on [Ventilation in Buildings](#).

14. Is there funding available for environmental changes which reduce transmission of COVID-19?

A: Yes, a facility may request the use of Civil Money Penalty (CMP) Reinvestment funds to purchase [portable fans and portable room air cleaners with high-efficiency particulate air \(HEPA, H-13 or -14\)](#) to increase or improve air quality. A maximum use of \$3,000 per facility including shipping costs may be requested.

15. Can a state require facilities to test visitors as a condition of entering the facility?

A: States can require visitors to be tested prior to entry if the facility is able to provide a rapid antigen test (i.e., the visitor is not responsible for obtaining a test). If the facility cannot provide the rapid antigen test, then the visit must occur without a test being performed if the visitor(s) has not had a positive viral test, does not report COVID-19 symptoms or meet the criteria for quarantine.