

## Tips for Communicating with Older Adults about COVID-19

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Older adults (individuals aged 60 or older), and especially those with severe chronic medical conditions, are at higher risk for more serious coronavirus illness and death.<sup>1</sup> Given the severe health risks coronavirus presents for this age group, effective risk communication is critical for informing older adults about how coronavirus threatens their health, how they can protect themselves, and where they can go for support. There is no “one size fits all” approach for health communication,<sup>2</sup> and it is essential for friends, family, health professionals, and public officials to be thoughtful about their approach to communicating with older adults during coronavirus.

### Effective Communication Strategies

Information about coronavirus is coming from many channels, including the news, online resources, and through conversations with friends and family. Some types of communications may be difficult for older adults to access or understand. For example, many older adults experience hearing loss, problems with vision, or cognitive challenges such as reduced capacity to process and remember new information.<sup>3</sup> However, there are effective strategies for addressing these challenges when communicating with older adults.

#### For Individuals with Cognitive Challenges

- Repeat essential information
- Focus on the important meaning of the information
- Use plain language
- Communicate directions and advice that need to be followed
- Provide reminders to aid memory

#### For Individuals with Visual Challenges

- Make information easy to see and read. Use large font, high contrast, and spacing between lines
- Reduce the amount of text
- Provide visual and audio information when possible

#### For Individuals with Hearing Challenges

- Limit background noise
- Speak clearly with more volume

### Provide Actionable and Appropriate Information

Coronavirus has caused enormous changes for all of us, but the speed and magnitude of the changes for older adults' daily lives has been enormous. Those in nursing homes and assisted living are no longer able to receive visitors or participate in social programming. Those aging in the community are experiencing disruptions in healthcare, social services, and changes in their social support networks due to physical distancing. Financial hardship may be extremely stressful for many older adults during this period. When communicating with older adults about coronavirus, be sure you're providing information and guidance that is appropriate for their unique reality. For example, consider what physical, financial, and technological limitations an older adult may face when talking about how they

will safely get meals and groceries. For some older adults, ordering groceries online may make sense, while others may need support coordinating home-delivered meals or groceries from local food banks or Meals on Wheels.

### **Communicate through Trusted Messengers**

People are more receptive to information from a trusted source, and this is especially true for older adults.<sup>4</sup> Friends, neighbors, relatives, trusted news sources, healthcare providers, and social service organizations have existing relationships with older adults that may enable them to deliver information about coronavirus more effectively than government agencies. Those with trusted relationships with older adults have a critical role to play in ensuring that the most recent and most relevant coronavirus information is reaching older adults, and in dispelling any misinformation.

### **Communicate to Combat Social Isolation**

While providing information on coronavirus is critical in the current moment, it is equally important to ensure that older adults are receiving social and emotional support. While in-person visits with older adults may not be safe, maintaining social connection is critical for older adults' health and wellbeing, especially as physical distancing guidelines mean social interactions that were once frequent are no longer possible. Talking on the phone, writing letters, or video-chatting are all ways to maintain communication with older adults. Reach out frequently and make time to truly listen and connect. Take a break from the news and talk about something positive or funny.

### **References**

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