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Capacity and needs of people living with dementia a priority for aged and health care COVID-19 coronavirus responses

The needs and capacity of people living with dementia must be a priority in response to the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak.

Hospitals, GP clinics, community health centres, community care and aged care homes are all currently responding to the COVID-19 coronavirus outbreak with various methods of urgent communication to their patients and clients.

Maree McCabe, CEO Dementia Australia said people living with dementia, depending on the progression of the disease, may no longer be able to follow the recommended protocols or read signs or emails that are designed to inform and protect all people living in residential or attending community settings.

“The ability to follow instructions or how to alert health professionals or other staff about potential symptoms may be a challenge, especially where there is limited capacity to communicate verbally or express pain and discomfort,” Ms McCabe said.

“There is much confusion generally about the information available with updates and new decisions changing daily to keep pace with this rapidly evolving situation. For people living with some form of cognitive impairment this can create even more uncertainty.”

Dementia Australia recommends the following actions:

- Use of dementia-friendly signage with large font sizes about appropriate hygiene practice on display for residents, family carers and visitors. The messages need to be clarified for people living with dementia and especially for those who speak languages other than English. Where possible include a picture that shows what you are trying to communicate.
- People living with dementia may need extra support to ensure their hygiene is managed to reduce the risk of infection. This may involve assistance with handwashing.
- If routines are disrupted by less visitors, changes in scheduled activities or staff, time needs to be dedicated to informing and reassuring the patients or residents in a timely manner. And for people with memory issues this may mean checking in regularly to ensure they have understood.
- If family are unable to visit, offering facetime, phone or video calls with family and friends to maintain communication may assist if residents and patients need reassurance.
- If a client's events or activities are cancelled try to provide alternative engagement within the home. There are many activity ideas on Dementia Australia's [website](https://dementia.org.au) and online.
- Shift handovers in the health and aged care industries, especially with relief staff unfamiliar with the person, may need to be extended to ensure there is thorough communications and directions where hygiene assistance is required.

- Clear information about the personal needs and wishes of the person living with dementia is an essential part of these handovers to maintain the most supportive environment possible.

“For people living with dementia, their family, carers and friends, and for anyone in the health and aged care industries, it is important for them to know they are not alone and if they have any questions please call the National Dementia Helpline 1800 100 500 for information and support,” Ms McCabe said.

-ENDS-

Dementia Australia is the national peak body and charity for people, of all ages, living with all forms of dementia, their families and carers. It provides advocacy, support services, education and information. An estimated 459,000 people have dementia in Australia. This number is projected to reach almost 1.1 million by 2058. Dementia Australia’s services are supported by the Australian Government.

National Dementia Helpline 1800 100 500

Interpreter service available

(The National Dementia Helpline is an Australian Government Initiative)

Dementia is a National Health Priority Area

www.dementia.org.au

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When talking or writing about dementia please refer to [Dementia-Friendly Language Guidelines](#).