

FAQs for Industry Code on Visiting Residential Aged Care Homes during COVID

What does the Code mean for me wanting to visit a Resident in aged care?

The Code reminds all Residents and their Visitors that they can seek to arrange a visit with their local aged care home. Wishes and preferences of residents will be at the centre of all decision making in relation to who visits them, and their choices will be sought and respected, unless the visitor is prohibited under state/territory directives.

Many aged care homes are asking visitors to use a booking system in order to manage the number of visitors in their facility at any one time. This also provides the opportunity for staff to clean a designated visiting area in between visits.

Please continue to be courteous and patient when working with your local aged care home to visit a Resident in a time that is mutually convenient. It may not always be possible to secure your preferred time.

My aged care home still isn't allowing me to visit what can I do?

The objective of the Code is to provide an agreed industry approach to ensure aged care residents are provided the opportunity to receive visitors during the COVID-19 pandemic, while minimising the risk of its introduction to, or spread within, a residential care home.

If your resident is not able to receive visits, the Code includes a suggested complaint process including:

Speak with home's manager and be specific about A) what you're asking for; and B) why you're asking for it.

If you still aren't getting anywhere and need support, you can **call Older Persons Advocacy Network (OPAN) 1800 700 600** or visit <https://opan.com.au> to receive support and advice from a trained advocate if you require. OPAN will support you in speaking with the manager of the aged care home or may with your permission contact the home to advocate on your behalf to be able to visit.

If you are not happy with the decision of the home (or at any time), you can make a complaint to the **Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission** by calling **1800 951 822** at any time (free call) or by visiting <https://www.agedcarequality.gov.au/making-complaint>

Receiving Visits at Aged Care Facilities

Why do facilities limit visits from relatives and friends?

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic how and when visitors interact with their loved ones in residential aged care have changed, this is because older people are at increased risk of becoming very sick or dying if they are infected by the coronavirus. Providers are also required to consider the health and wellbeing of all residents in the home and balance this against the rights of individual residents to have visitors. State and territory Directives include requirements providers must adhere to. The new rules are designed to balance the risk of someone with COVID-19 bringing it into an aged care home, and the mental health of residents and their need to remain connected with their family and friends.

For some, this means they cannot visit as often as they or the resident would like.

To ensure fairness, where there are limits on the number of visitors coming into the home at any one time a booking system or roster system may be used.

As COVID-19 become the new normal, and community transmission remains low, aged care facilities are working to increase the number and variety of visits available. This is desirable because increasing the frequency and duration of visits, while maintaining appropriate screening and infection prevention measures will improve the wellbeing of residents.

How should complaints about visits be handled?

Firstly, residents and visitors should speak with the residential aged care home regarding their specific arrangements for visitors. If the home has set times, and these are not suitable (e.g. visiting hours are set for when you are at work) and if you are comfortable, try speaking with the manager of the residential aged care home directly and try to organise a time that works for everyone.

If you are not comfortable to talk to the home directly, or you are not happy with their response you can talk to the **Older Persons Advocacy Network (OPAN)** who have trained advocates. **OPAN can be contacted on 1800 700 600** or visit <https://opan.com.au>

If you are unhappy with the decision of the home (or at any time), you can make a complaint to the **Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission** by calling **1800 951 822** or by visit <https://www.agedcarequality.gov.au/making-complaint>

What is the minimum amount of time a visit should be?

AHPPC guidelines released on 19 June 2020 state that; *“spouses or other close relatives or social supports are not limited in the number of hours that they spend with their spouse/relative”*. The Code is clear that; *“It is not up to the aged care home or its staff to determine who is or is not eligible to be a visitor, including who is a “close family member” or a visitor to provide “social support”*.

Time limits for use of a designated visiting area may be required, in order to make the area available to a range of visitors such as those in shared rooms and those who elect to not receive visitors in their rooms. In these circumstances a minimum visiting time of 60 minutes is recommended (except in the case of a short visit due to an outbreak which may be 30 minutes).

Visiting hours where the designated visiting area can be used should progressively return to the visiting hours that homes had prior to COVID-19, including on weekends if this was previously available. However, if an outbreak occurs in a home or a local cluster of COVID-19 occurs in surrounding suburbs, the home may increase visitor restrictions including the hours that visits may occur.

Can a resident decide to take extra risks or bend social distancing rules?

AHPPC advice clearly states that; *“Visitors must practice social distancing where possible, including maintaining 1.5 metres. Visitors have a responsibility to supervise any children with them, practice hand hygiene and cough etiquette (for example coughing or sneezing into your elbow not your hands), and to comply with directions given by RACF staff.”*

Are window visits or video calls an acceptable substitute for in-person visits?

The only time a window contacts should be the only form of ‘visits’ provided is when a suspected or actual infection outbreak occurs.

In-person visits are the preferred approach for residents and visitors and should be supported wherever practical. Facilities may provide limited visiting opportunities each week in order to manage the number of visitors onsite each week (and therefore the potential increased risk of COVID-19). Given the restrictions on the number of visits possible in some aged care homes, window visits can be offered in addition to in-person visits (but not instead of in-person visits).

To assist with additional opportunities to connect with Residents some aged care homes are providing, additional things on top of visits to provide alternate approaches such as through the use of video calls, additional telephone calls or ‘*window-visits*’.

What if there is an outbreak in an aged care home?

If an aged care home has an infectious outbreak, they are required to enact enhanced visitor restrictions meaning that no in-person visits may occur. In these circumstances, facilities may implement alternate approaches such as video calls or window contacts to provide ongoing contact between residents and visitors during temporary period while the outbreak is being managed.

Residents Leaving an Aged Care Facility

Can a resident leave a residential aged care home for a Medical Appointment?

Yes, medical and other appointments for health-related services are permitted. Continued engagement with medical and health services is encouraged as part of managing your physical and mental wellbeing.

Where a resident attends a medical or health service offsite reasonable, proportionate and a risk based-approach to infection prevention and control measures will be followed (e.g. wearing of PPE while offsite, screening on return, and assessment of level of likely interaction with possible suspected cases of COVID-19). The current prevalence of COVID-19 in the local community and COVID-19 cluster location are to be considered when determining proportionate infection prevention and control measures during and post attendance at an external medical or health service.

A level of assessment of the risk of transmission of COVID-19 (based on current levels of COVID-19 in the local suburbs or towns) should be conducted by the provider. You may be asked to utilize infection prevention measures (such as maintaining social distancing where possible, washing hands and coughing into your elbows). In a rare circumstance you may be asked to wear a mask or other personal protective equipment where those measures are deemed necessary based on an increased level of risk of community transmission.

Proportionate assessment should occur when returning from a medical appointment. Self-isolation or quarantine should only occur if directed by a public health unit or upon recommendation from the discharging medical practitioner from the appointment.

You may also be provided with the option to undertake the medical appointment through phone or video link, where that is deemed appropriate and will not impact on your health condition or health status. You must be consulted on and agree to the way your healthcare will be provided.

Can aged care home take residents out for a social activity?

No, external excursions of groups of residents are not permitted at this stage.

Can a Visitor take residents outside for an outing or family visit?

Yes. Individual residents, and residents who are family members, may leave the home for small family gatherings. Residents and families will be expected to comply with local guidelines about social distancing and any other requirements governing outings that are in place. In line with this, your aged care home will need to ask you or your visitor a number of questions in order to conduct a risk assessment of the proposed gathering and the resident may be required to undertake some screening questions on return to the home. You are encouraged to talk to the staff about the procedures in place in the home for residents leaving the home for an outing.

What are the likely procedures for taking residents outside for an outing or family visit?

Under the Charter of Aged Care Rights, a person has the right to *'have control over and make choices about my care, and personal and social life, including where choices involve personal risk'* (Right 7). However, it is also important to understand this right applies to other residents as well. The health and wellbeing of all residents are considered and that we all play our part and adhere to the procedures put in place to allow safe visiting, outing and family visits.

During this period of the COVID-19 pandemic it is suggested that *'small family gatherings'* be consistent with the number of guests you can have visit your home according to your State/Territory directives.

The following may need to occur prior to the outing or family visit:

- Provision of information on the aged care homes policy and procedures
- Consideration of you and your family's responsibilities during the outing/family visits
- Understanding the infection prevention procedures, social distancing and personal hygiene requirements while on the outing/family visit
- Any likely requirements on return if these procedures have not been followed

What is a risk assessment of a family outing likely to consider?

A risk assessment of the family visit and outing will be conducted by the aged care provider, this could include:

- The location of the outing/family visit
- The number of people attending
- If the outing/family visit is to be indoors or outdoors
- The level of knowledge of the people attendings recent travel history, known symptoms of being unwell
- If the people attending the outing/family visit have been vaccinated against influenza 2020

You may be asked to provide the contact details of the people who will be attending. You will be asked to commit to following the procedures during and after the outing/family visit and your responsibilities under the agreement.

You may need to undergo some screening procedures on your return. These may include checking your temperature, completing a screening questionnaire and agreeing that you complied with the procedures while you were away on the outing/family visit.

There may be times when the aged care home needs to increase the infection prevention procedures on your return from and outing/family visit. This should be done in a way that is proportionate to the level of risk and exposure to COVID-19 which may have occurred during the outing/family visit or emerging knowledge of outbreaks during your outing/family visit.

Other Issues

How will the medical information of Visitors, including my vaccination record, be treated by the aged care provider?

Aged care providers are required to seek appropriate evidence of immunisation from all individuals visiting aged care facilities. Dependent on the home's process, they may take a copy of your immunization record to facilitate smoother entry on future visits.

Aged Care Providers must keep all medical information provided by visitors private under the Privacy Act and other laws. This information must remain secure and not shared with anyone not legally entitled to access the information.

Are there any exemptions from the Flu Vaccination requirement?

State and Territory Health Directives require an individual has been vaccinated in order to visit and has only a small number of exemptions to that. You can read more about exemptions here; <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/flu-vaccination-requirements-for-aged-care-facilities>

What does ‘local vicinity’ or ‘local cluster’ mean?

AHPPC recommends that facilities return to a higher level of protection (such as restricting visiting service providers) if there are recent cases of COVID-19 acquired in the local vicinity of the facility. The AHPPC guidance states; *“A guide would be that there are cases in the surrounding suburbs or town that have not been acquired overseas.”*

What does ‘increased visitor restrictions’ mean?

Depending on the circumstances of the individual aged care home, it may mean that an aged care provider may limit or cease all in person or in room visits for the period of the outbreak. The Code at Principle 10 notes that; *“Where there is a suspected or actual outbreak of COVID-19, or a suspected/known case of COVID-19 within a home, increased visitor restrictions will be implemented which may include exclusion of visitors.”*

I am a Community Visitor or an OPAN Advocate, am I covered under the Visitor Code?

Yes. The Code has been updated to include Community Visitors as a type of visitor, in recognition that some facilities have not returned to using volunteers onsite.

OPAN Advocate & Community Visitor Scheme (CVS) volunteers should have access in line with State/Territory health directives. These visitors need to meet the state and territory directives and is the responsibility of their auspicing organisation to assist them to do so. CVS and Aged Care Advocates must comply with aged care home screening and infection control and prevention measures.

Visits from Pets

There are no restrictions specifically in relation to visits by pets due to COVID-19. However, local requirements on pets and State/Territory emergency directions, including screening and monitoring of visitors still apply.

What can I do if my aged care home is not compliant with the code?

You can talk to the provider if you're comfortable or you can contact an aged care advocate to give you some assistance. You can access an advocate by calling **OPAN on 1800 700 600**. Complaints of non-adherence, lack of action on implementation or non-compliance should be reported to the **Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission through its complaints process by calling 1800 951 822**.

In addition, The Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission has indicated that it will take non-adherence or implementation of the Industry Code into account in assessing the Home/Facility against the aged care standards as part of regulatory assessment and action.

Where can I find examples of best practice for aged care visiting?

During the early stages of COVID-19 visitor restrictions, many aged care providers introduced innovative ways to ensure the ongoing health, safety and wellbeing of residents in their care, from keeping in touch with family and friends to activities that promote engagement. The Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission has made several examples available here: <https://www.agedcarequality.gov.au/providers/visitor-restrictions-residential-aged-care-services#examples%20of%20innovation>

The Industry Code for Visiting Residential Aged Care Homes during COVID-19 welcomes examples of best practice in implementing the Code. These examples can be provided by aged care homes to their peak body or emailed to visitoraccesscode@agedservices.asn.au .