

COVID-19 Cases Rising Again in Nursing Homes: What's Different This Time

The COVID-19 vaccination rate among nursing home residents is relatively high. Vladimir Vladimirov/Getty Images

- New cases of COVID-19 have increased in January among residents and employees at nursing home facilities, although the death rate has remained stable.
- Some care facilities have implemented new visitor restrictions, including proof of vaccination, a negative COVID-19 test, and wearing personal protective equipment.
- Patient advocates advise family members of people in nursing homes to stay in close contact with facility employees to make sure their loved ones are getting proper care.

With the Omicron variant of the coronavirus surging the past few months, nursing homes are again seeing a spike in case numbers.

This comes even as deaths remain relatively low, likely thanks to high vaccination rates among older adults.

As of mid-January, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports a nearly 10-fold rise

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in new nursing home COVID-19 cases since November — 40,000 among residents and staff. However, that number is down from a record-high during the first week of January — more than 67,000 cases.

The death rate has remained relatively stable, indicating that vaccines are doing their job in limiting the severity of new cases.

During the 7-day period ending Jan. 17, 988 deaths were reported in U.S. nursing homes, a slight increase over the previous few weeks but nowhere near the 7-day total of 6,128 deaths reported on Dec. 20, 2020.

According to the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, which tracks medical data from nursing homes, as of Jan. 9 there have been 800,026 confirmed COVID-19 cases among nursing home residents since the start of the pandemic, with 142,693 deaths. There were another 2,312 COVID-19-related deaths among staff.

The CDC reports that 63 percent of eligible U.S. residents are fully vaccinated, compared with more than 87 percent of nursing home residents.

New restrictions

Because older adults are more susceptible to the novel coronavirus, nursing homes are again imposing restrictions on visitors.

Some are requiring proof of vaccination or a recent negative COVID-19 test.

“As of January 2022 in New York state, all visitors to a nursing home are required to show proof of a negative COVID-19 test upon entry,” Vanessa Steil, a board certified patient advocate, told [name removed].

“As the sole caregiver to my 93-year-old grandmother in a Long Island, New York, nursing home who I visit nightly to help with meals, this means that I need to be tested every 72 hours to comply with the mandate. That’s three PCR tests a week,” she said.

When Omicron numbers began to spike in December, Steil said she was required to wear full personal protective equipment to visit residents.

“Each night when I arrive, I put on an N95 mask, a surgical mask, and then a face shield in my car and add a gown and gloves before entering my grandmother’s room,” Steil said.

Nursing homes are also limiting visits to common areas and reinstituting physical distancing measures.

In addition, the U.S. Supreme Court earlier this month upheld a Biden administration vaccine mandate for most healthcare workers. More than 57,000 nursing home workers contracted the coronavirus during the week ending Jan. 9 — more than 10 times as many as a month earlier.

Nearly 84 percent of nursing home staff are now fully vaccinated. But only 30 percent have received boosters, according to CDC figures

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, which is less than half of the residents who are boosted.

And with related staffing shortages, some states such as New Jersey and Minnesota have called in the National Guard to help with everyday tasks involving residents.

A potential ‘bottleneck’

Data from CarePort, a company that connects people in more than 1,000 hospitals to long-term care facilities, shows the average length of stay at hospitals for people getting discharged to skilled nursing facilities is up 21 percent this month compared with 2019.

On its website, CarePort said “based on anecdotal reports, hospitals are facing challenges transitioning COVID-19 patients out of the hospital

because understandably, nursing homes are reluctant to take in new patients.”

CarePort surveyed long-term facilities that typically take in older adults after hospital stays.

“Our survey results show that fewer than 10 percent of nursing homes reported the ability to care for incoming COVID-19 patients. When hospitalized COVID-19 patients cannot leave the hospital because there is no place for them to recover, hospital capacity will be further exacerbated,” CarePort said on its website.

The organization added a nursing home bed “bottleneck” could be on the way.

“In New York City alone, there could potentially be a shortage of over 1,000 beds,” the company said.

What families can do

Steven M. Levin, a Chicago attorney specializing in nursing home advocacy, told [name removed] last year that families can be proactive during the crisis, with communication with workers at the facility being key.

He urged family members to ask questions, especially regarding staffing ratios.

“It’s horrible to think that your loved one is in a facility where they might become infected at any time and there’s just nothing you can do about it,” Levin said.

Once a family member is in a nursing facility, Levin says to “communicate, communicate, communicate.”

“Call up the facility. Talk to the director. Talk to the director of nursing,” he advised. “If possible, talk to the nurses delivering care to your loved one. See what you can do with electronic communication to talk to your loved one directly.”

Levin also said families should explore bringing older relatives into their homes if they can care for them, or to seek in-home or outpatient therapy if they can afford it.