

Dear Director,

### **COVID-19 in the ACT**

In the ACT and nationally we are doing well to control the transmission of COVID-19. This is in part due to the important work undertaken by aged care facilities to protect their vulnerable elderly residents. There is no evidence of community transmission in the ACT currently, but it is important to keep up-to-date with the situation and for the community to remain vigilant. As we are aiming for suppression of COVID-19 in Australia and because the elderly are a vulnerable group, early identification and response to cases of COVID-19 is a priority, particularly in residential aged care.

The Communicable Disease Control section of ACT Health is able to assist and provide advice to ACT aged care facilities on infection control and COVID-19 outbreak management.

#### ***Visitor and Visit Restrictions***

There are currently measures in place in the ACT to restrict visits and visitors to aged care facilities in order to assist in slowing the spread of COVID-19. Details of the restrictions are available on the [ACT Health website](#).

We understand the priority to protect vulnerable residents but also note that sometimes actions can have unintended negative consequences. For example, tighter visitor restrictions where visits to residents are completely prevented can have harmful impacts on a resident's physical and mental health. These aims and approaches need to be balanced, particularly as residents approach the end of their life. Further information is available in a [statement from the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee \(AHPPC\) issued on 21 April](#).

We acknowledge that some aged care facilities in the ACT may be operating under organisational policies developed outside of the ACT. However, it may be possible to take into account our local epidemiology and context in the practical implementation of these policies, and we can work with facilities towards this.

For public health reasons, tightening of visitor restrictions may be appropriate if there is a case of COVID-19 and/or an outbreak of COVID-19 in an aged care facility.

For questions relating to the restrictions or advice on their implementation, please contact the Communicable Disease Control (CDC) Information Line on (02) 5124 9213 and press option 2 and ask for the Infection Control Team.

### ***Preparedness***

In preparation for further cases of COVID-19 in the ACT community, you should:

1. Ensure you are familiar with the [National COVID-19 guidelines for outbreaks in residential care facilities](#);
2. Have an outbreak management plan and robust infection control program in place to prevent and control transmission of COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses; and
3. Have a workforce management plan for staff absenteeism.

### ***When to Test for COVID-19***

Residents with acute respiratory infection (e.g. cough, sore throat, shortness of breath) or fever (or history of fever e.g. chills, sweats) should be isolated and promptly tested. As elderly residents often have non-classic respiratory symptoms, and fever may be absent, you should consider testing any resident with any new respiratory symptom. Other symptoms of COVID-19 that may occur in the elderly include increased confusion and loss of appetite; consider testing individuals with these symptoms if there is no clear alternate cause.

Once requested by a medical officer, testing should be undertaken and specimens collected by an appropriately trained GP or pathology provider as the preferred option. A nurse (RN or EN) at the facility who has received training in respiratory sample collection and proper use of personal protective equipment can also collect the appropriate specimens. This training could be conducted online but should include, at a minimum, one instance of specimen collection that has been supervised by an experienced staff member.

Contact and droplet transmission-based precautions are required when collecting specimens from residents with mild illness. Contact and airborne precautions (as for droplet precautions but using a P2/N95 mask instead of a surgical mask) are required when collecting specimens from residents with severe symptoms suggestive of pneumonia (e.g. fever and difficulty breathing, or frequent, severe or productive coughing episodes), if not managed in hospital.

A single flocked swab in viral transport media or liquid Amies should be used to take a throat specimen followed by a nasopharyngeal specimen, and both COVID-19 and respiratory PCR testing should be requested. If possible, samples should be sent to ACT Pathology.

Under the *Public Health Act 1997*, you must notify CDC if you have **two or more cases of Acute Respiratory Illness in residents or staff of a residential care facility within 3 days (72 hours)** by calling the CDC Information Line on (02) 5124 9213, press option 2 and ask for the Infection Control Team or (02) 9962 4155 after business hours. CDC can assist with outbreak management and provide infection control and testing advice.

All staff should be vigilant for fever or any symptoms of acute respiratory infection (ARI) and adhere to hygiene measures, including physical distancing where possible. Staff who

develop even minimal symptoms of ARI must be excluded from work, isolate at home and arrange testing for COVID-19 and other respiratory viruses. If they have COVID-19 they will need to isolate at home until CDC advises that it is safe for them to return to work. Any staff with ARI symptoms who has a negative COVID-19 test result should be excluded from work for 5 days from their illness onset. Staff who are close contacts of a confirmed COVID-19 case or are a recently returned traveller will need to quarantine at home for 14 days.

### ***Personal Protective Equipment***

For personal protective equipment (PPE) supplies, contact your regular PPE supplier or parent organisation. If you are unable to procure PPE through regular channels, you can email your request to the Australian Government Department of Health at [agedcarecovidppe@health.gov.au](mailto:agedcarecovidppe@health.gov.au).

The requests will then be triaged by the Australian Government Department of Health with priority given to those facilities with:

- An outbreak or suspected case of COVID-19 or other reportable infectious respiratory disease; or
- Insufficient stocks of masks to ensure immediate continuity of safe, quality care.

In liaison with ACT Health, the Australian Government Department of Health will advise you if the request is approved. If approved, ACT Health will arrange for the PPE to be provided to your facility.

Staff should be trained and deemed competent in the proper use of PPE, including donning and doffing procedures. Refresher training is recommended for all existing and new staff. A [training video](#) on donning and doffing is available from the NSW Clinical Excellence Commission.

For PPE recommendations when caring for suspected or confirmed COVID-19 cases, please refer to the [COVID-19 guidelines for outbreaks in residential care facilities](#).

### ***Advanced Care Plans***

For residents to receive the level of healthcare they wish to receive if they become seriously unwell, it is recommended that all residents have an Advanced Care Plan in place and that these plans are current.

### ***Influenza and Gastroenteritis***

Although COVID-19 is a focus at present, it is important to continue to be on the lookout and test for other communicable diseases, where appropriate, including influenza and gastrointestinal illness, which increase in incidence during the winter months.

Under the *Public Health Act 1997*, you must notify CDC if you have **two or more cases of gastroenteritis (diarrhoea and/or vomiting) among residents and/or staff in a 24 hour period** by calling the CDC Information Line on 02 5124 9213, press option 2 and ask for the

Infection Control Team, or (02) 9962 4155 after business hours. CDC can assist with outbreak management and provide infection control and testing advice.

### ***Influenza Vaccination***

Annual influenza vaccination is the single most effective action in preventing the spread of influenza and should be promoted amongst residents, staff and visitors. All staff (including reception staff, cleaners, kitchen and laundry staff etc.) and visitors entering the facility are required to be vaccinated for influenza from 1<sup>st</sup> May, where the vaccine is available to the person.

Where the vaccine is not available to staff due to vaccine supply issues or where a staff member has a medical contraindication to the vaccine, as defined in the Australian Immunisation Handbook, then the vaccine is not considered to be 'available' to them. Medical contraindications to receiving the vaccine should be documented by a medical practitioner.

Services may consider whether they wish to deploy these staff elsewhere. Facilities experiencing supply issues should prioritise vaccination of staff who are in direct contact with residents, followed by vaccination of staff who have less contact with residents.

Immunisation providers should implement enhanced infection control measures to ensure that they can safely provide influenza vaccination services. Further information is available on the ACT Health website (see Resources at the end of this letter).

If you are having issues in arranging influenza vaccination for your staff or residents, please inform the Capital Health Network by emailing [s.leavens@chnact.org.au](mailto:s.leavens@chnact.org.au)

Resources you may find useful for COVID-19, influenza and gastroenteritis are available in Attachment 1 to this letter.

For more information, please call the CDC Information Line on (02) 5124 9213, press option 2 and ask for the Infection Control Team.

Yours sincerely



Dr Kerry Coleman  
Chief Health Officer  
Health Protection Service  
ACT Health

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## Attachment 1 – Links to Resources for COVID-19, Influenza and Gastroenteritis

### COVID-19

For more information on COVID-19 in Aged Care, please refer to the following resources:

- COVID-19 Aged Care webpage of the ACT Health website – please monitor this page for updates and resources  
<https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/help-and-advice/aged-care>
- Planning and managing influenza vaccination during the COVID-19 pandemic  
<https://www.health.act.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-04/Information-Flu-vaccination-clinics-during-COVID-19.pdf>
- Resources for Aged Care Providers on the Department of Health website  
<https://www.health.gov.au/resources/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-resources-for-health-professionals-including-aged-care-providers-pathology-providers-and-healthcare-managers>
- COVID-19 guidelines for outbreaks in residential care facilities  
<https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidelines-for-outbreaks-in-residential-care-facilities>
- COVID-19 guidelines for infection prevention and control in residential care facilities  
<https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidelines-for-infection-prevention-and-control-in-residential-care-facilities>
- COVID-19 outbreak management in residential care facilities  
<https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak-management-in-residential-care-facilities>
- COVID-19 Infection Control Training including PPE and outbreak management  
<https://www.covid-19training.gov.au/>

### Influenza

For more information on managing influenza outbreaks, please refer to the following resources:

- *The ACT Health 'Influenza-like illness outbreaks'*  
<https://www.health.act.gov.au/about-our-health-system/population-health/disease-surveillance/influenza-illness-outbreaks>
- The '*Influ-Info Kit for Aged Care*' toolkit:  
<https://agedcare.health.gov.au/publications-articles/resources-learning-training/influ-info-influenza-kit-for-aged-care>
- '*A Practical Guide to assist in the Prevention and Management of Influenza Outbreaks in Residential Care Facilities in Australia*' (new version released in March 2017)  
<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/cdna-flu-guidelines.htm>

## **Gastroenteritis**

For advice on managing gastroenteritis outbreaks, please refer to the following resources:

- The ACT Health '*Gastroenteritis outbreaks in childcare and aged care settings*' website:  
<https://www.health.act.gov.au/about-our-health-system/population-health/disease-surveillance/gastroenteritis-outbreaks>
- The '*Gastroenteritis Kit for Aged Care*' which can be found at:  
<https://agedcare.health.gov.au/publications-articles/resources-learning-training/gastro-info-gastroenteritis-kit-for-aged-care-resources-to-assist-residential-aged-care-homes-in-preventing-identifying-managing-outbreaks-of-gastroenteritis>