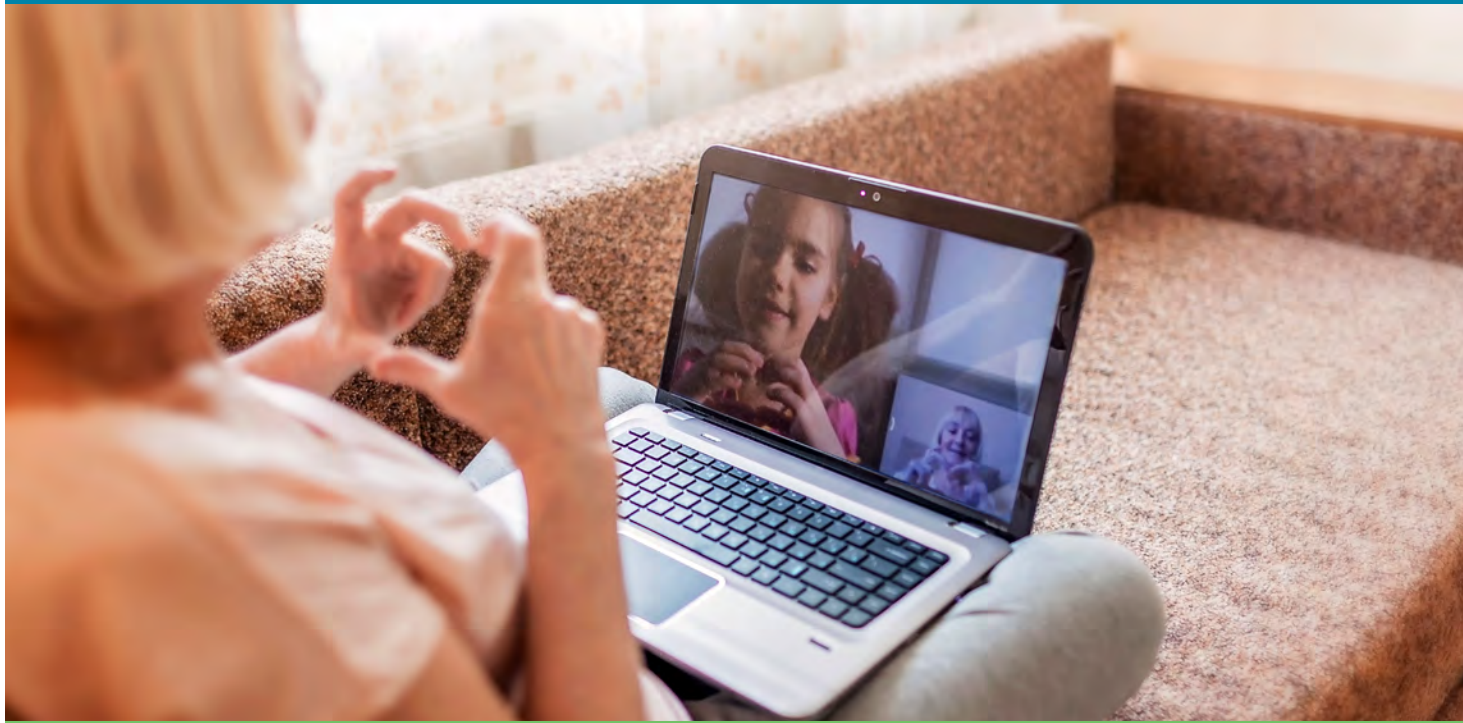


# COVID-19: Those with family members in long-term care facilities



As the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve, public health authorities and medical experts have expressed growing concern for high risk populations, including the elderly. High risk populations have greater susceptibility to infection and more likely to experience possible serious complications if infected.

With a number of long-term care homes across the country in outbreak scenarios, elderly residents face increasing risk of infection and the personal challenges presented by physical distancing, particularly where relatives assisted in providing essential care support.

According to Dr. Theresa Tam, Canada's chief public health officer, the majority of deaths from COVID-19 have been attributed to those who are 80 years of age or older.<sup>1</sup> As a result, families with persons they care for in a long-term care facility have a greater need to timely and reliable information.

As the number of cases increase among long-term care residents and personal support workers, provincial governments are enacting measures to control the spread of infection within facilities. Many homes designed for shared accommodation and common spaces have taken action to create better isolation areas. In some instances, provinces have stopped support staff from working in more than one home to combat the spread of infection. Additionally, provinces have increased testing frequency for residents and staff while assigning additional funding for personal protective equipment. The federal government has also established new guidelines for long-term care homes including, enhanced cleaning, mandatory medical screening for staff, and physical distancing protocols within common spaces and at meal times.

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Dr. Samir Sinha, director of geriatrics at Sinai Health System and the University Health Network in Toronto, listed four considerations of safety for long-term care homes in a recent interview.<sup>2</sup>

- **Is the facility restricting non-essential movement?**

Has the home eliminated all non-essential business and visitors, including onsite services delivered through external third parties, and have partial restrictions on visits by family members been established?

- **Are staff members only working in one long-term care home?** Having support staff working at one facility decreases the risk of infection.

- **Are all visitor and staff members wearing masks?** As medical experts continue to investigate the virus, findings have indicated that community and asymptomatic spread is occurring. It's recommended that everyone in the facility wear a mask at all times.

- **How much are they testing?** Recent federal and provincial measures have increased the requirements for testing, including frequency. This applies to both residents and staff.

As families address new challenges related to long-term care, many are questioning whether they should remove the person they care about from the residential care facility. These are difficult and unique scenarios for everyone involved. Dr. Barbara Liu, executive director of the Regional Geriatric Program of Toronto, suggests the following for those considering this important decision.<sup>2</sup>

- **Do you have the physical care needs required?** Seniors often need mobility assistance which may require more than one person or mechanical supports. There may be bathing and dressing needs as well as special dietary considerations, and physical roadblocks like stairs.

- **Do they require cognitive support?** Beyond physical challenges, as a caregiver you need to consider the cognitive difficulties that may be present including dementia. In some instances behaviours may be unpredictable and combative. Additionally, there may be a risk of wandering without continuous supervision.

- **What are their medical requirements?** Families need to consider the ability to administer appropriate medications including injections and oxygen. Caregivers also need to monitor and recognize changes in health condition and how to access help when needed.

- **Will they be able to return to the facility after the pandemic?** It's important to verify policies with the home before making a decision. In some instances you may be placed on a waiting list or fast-tracked. Remember, it's best to ask questions before taking any action.

Remember, the task of becoming a primary care provider is physically and emotionally demanding and the requirements on time are varied. Many families find themselves as the sandwich generation, meaning caring for both children and parents while managing professional work obligations. Take time to understand your unique situation, becoming educated will assist in your decision making.

### References

1. Tam, Theresa Dr. (2020) Available from: [https://twitter.com/CPHO\\_Canada/status/1246950893251186689](https://twitter.com/CPHO_Canada/status/1246950893251186689)
2. Dunham, Jackie. Should you remove your loved one from a long-term care home? (2020) Available from: <https://www.ctvnews.ca/health/coronavirus/should-you-remove-your-loved-one-from-a-long-term-care-home-1.4890219>

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