

Talking Points Regarding Allowing Visitors after Vaccination of Residents and Staff in Post-Acute and Long-Term Care Settings

January 20, 2021

As we welcome the long-awaited COVID-19 vaccines and continue to educate residents and staff about the many benefits of vaccination against this deadly virus, we understand that the expected next step will be to reopen facilities to visitors who are longing to hug their loved ones again.

However, reopening facilities to visitors will not be a “one size fits all” policy, and most importantly, we still need more scientific data regarding whether getting the vaccine prevents or significantly decreases transmission of the SARS-CoV-2 virus to others, or simply prevents the person who is vaccinated from becoming sick with COVID-19. Communicating these ideas to residents and family members may be difficult, but an honest and open discussion about this now is important as patience is running low and many expected that the doors would be opened and visits resumed soon after vaccination of residents and staff was complete.

As we await the science, several other factors will need to be considered before allowing visitors into post-acute and long-term care (PALTC) facilities again. AMDA-The Society for Post-Acute and Long-Term Care Medicine offers the following to consider:

- **Vaccination rate of staff.** As we continue to work to decrease vaccine hesitancy in staff members and increase the rate at which staff and residents are vaccinated across all PALTC settings, it makes sense that the more people in a setting who are vaccinated, the safer it will be for all. A staff vaccination rate of 80 or 90% compared to a vaccination rate of 30 or 40% will play a significant role in deciding whether it is safe for visitors to come.
- **Vaccination rate of residents.** Fortunately, we are seeing less vaccine hesitancy in PALTC residents than we have seen with staff. Still, the vaccination rate of residents will be a factor to consider when developing policy around opening to visitors.
- **Community rate of positive COVID-19 cases and vaccination.** As the vaccine roll-out has been slower than anticipated, the number of positive COVID-19 cases in a community will play a significant role when deciding about opening to visitors, as most in the community will not have been vaccinated yet. As the rate of vaccination in the community increases, the safety of allowing visitors will increase as well.
- **Personal protective equipment (PPE).** Plan for the continued use of PPE, as it still may be possible to pass COVID-19 from an asymptomatic individual (e.g. someone who has been vaccinated and has no symptoms) to a resident or staff member within the facility. Not only will this serve as another safeguard to prevent spread of COVID-19, it can also help reduce the risk of respiratory infections such as flu, which can lead to hospitalization and even death in older adults.
- **Risk versus benefit.** The emotional toll of not being able to visit with friends and relatives cannot be overstated. Guidance from local, state and federal health departments, including a review of each facility’s unique situation will define what parameters you set for visitors. As has been the case since the pandemic began, compassionate care visits are allowed, and as vaccination rates increase, we expect that visitation will be expanded.

Talking Points Regarding Allowing Visitors after Vaccination of Residents and Staff in Post-Acute and Long-Term Care Settings

January 20, 2021

Points to Discuss with Family Members:

- Just as we've used science to guide us in best ways to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus and to develop an effective vaccine, we need to continue to follow the scientific data as we make progress in fighting this virus. We don't yet know if getting the vaccine will prevent all infections and transmission of the virus to other people, so until we know more, we still need to limit in-person visits, wear PPE and stay socially distanced as much as possible.
- We understand your frustration about not being able to hug and kiss your loved ones living in our long-term care community. You can help by educating others about the benefits of the vaccine and encouraging them to get the vaccine as soon as it's available to them. The higher the vaccination rate, the sooner we will be able to have life return to some form of normalcy.
- There is a light at the end of the tunnel! We've come this far, we don't want to go three steps forward and five steps back by allowing visitors before we know that it is safe for you and your loved ones. We are committed to keeping you informed as we develop new policies around visits post-vaccination.
- We will continue to work with you to facilitate video visits, phone calls and window visits. We also encourage you to send letters and pictures to your loved ones to help stay connected. If they've gotten the vaccine, share with them how glad you are that they will be protected from COVID-19. You can also thank staff for getting immunized and doing their part to decrease the risk and spread of COVID-19.
- Together, by getting vaccinated and engaging and encouraging others in the community to do the same, we step closer to opening our communities safely.