

Coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19): Guidance for Hospital Visitation

This document provides best practice recommendations on the management of visitors to hospitals in the District of Columbia to reduce the risk of transmission of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. This guidance applies to any hospital licensed by DC Health. **Except for current mandates in effect under a Mayor's Order or other existing local or federal regulation, any definitive action statements made in this guidance (e.g., "must") are considered essential best practice recommendations to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. DC Health may provide stricter guidance for visitation based on outbreak specific recommendations.**

The following categories of visitors must not enter a healthcare facility due to the risk of exposing people to COVID-19: People with symptoms of COVID-19, people with a confirmed diagnosis of COVID-19 (with or without symptoms) who meet DC Health isolation criteria for patients in healthcare settings¹, and people with a close contact exposure² to COVID-19 in the past 10 days. Symptoms of COVID-19 may include: fever chills, cough, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, fatigue, muscle or body aches, headache, new loss of taste or smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting, or diarrhea.

General visitor guidelines

- **WHO can visit?**
 - Hospitals should facilitate safe visitation whenever possible.
 - Indoor visitation should be limited to individuals who can comply with masking and physical distancing³ when required (including younger children).
- **WHEN should visitation be avoided?**
 - When the unit to be visited is undergoing testing related to a confirmed or suspected outbreak
 - When the patient to be visited is a person under investigation (PUI) for COVID-19 or has a confirmed COVID-19 infection and is in their infectious period⁴ (considerations for limited exceptions to these scenarios are on page 3).
 - Visitation must be allowed at all times for compassionate care situations and for those essential to support persons with disabilities. (While end-of-life situations have been used as examples of compassionate care situations, the term "compassionate care situations" does not exclusively refer to end-of-life situations.)
 - Hospitals must ensure patients have adequate and lawful access to chaplains or clergy.
- **WHERE should visitation occur?**
 - During indoor visitation:
 - If possible, choose a space that allows for adequate physical distancing⁶ (at least 6 feet) between patient and visitors.
 - Maximize ventilation as much as possible (e.g., keep doors open).

¹ For details, see *Guidance on Discontinuation of Transmission-Based Precautions Guidance for Patients with Confirmed or Suspected COVID-19 in Healthcare Settings* at coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance.

² A **close contact exposure** occurs when someone is within 6 feet of a person who tested positive for COVID-19 for a cumulative 15 minutes or more over a 24-hour period. For details, see *Guidance After Exposure to a Person Confirmed to have COVID-19: Precautions, Quarantine and Testing* at coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance.

³ While not required, physical distancing remains the safest option when indoors, especially for patients who are not up to date on their COVID-19 vaccine or who are immunocompromised. A person is considered **up to date** with their COVID-19 vaccine after they have received all recommended doses of the vaccine, including all recommended booster doses. **For detailed information about staying up to date on your COVID-19 vaccine, see cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/vaccines/stay-up-to-date.html.**

⁴ The infectious period for COVID-19 starts 2 days before symptom onset and typically ends 10 days after symptom onset. (Use test date for people who don't have symptoms.)

- Clean and disinfect high-touch surfaces frequently.
 - Facilities should enable in-room visitation while adhering to the core principles of COVID-19 infection prevention.
 - If visitation occurs in a patient's room:
 - Visitors must treat each roommate as having a separate zone.
 - Visitors must not enter the roommate's zone except as required for entry or exit of the room.
 - Privacy curtains must be drawn to limit direct contact.
 - Visitors must not sit or lay on the resident's bed.
 - Visitors must not use patient facilities, including restrooms. Visitors should be directed to restrooms that are not used by patients.
 - Cleaning and disinfection of high-touch surfaces in the room (e.g., tables, door handles, light switches) should occur immediately after the visit is completed.
- During visitation:
 - At a minimum, **all visitors must wear well-fitting masks or respirators in any area where it is required for staff.**⁵
 - For more information, see ***Required PPE for Healthcare Facilities*** at coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance
 - The maximum number of visitors allowed to visit at any one time should be limited to the ability of visitors to maintain physical distancing⁶ in the space where the visit is to occur.
 - Visitors should only be allowed to visit the patient they indicated in the visitor log on arrival. Visiting multiple patients within the same day should be discouraged.
- Facilities must establish a policy or process to:
 - Ensure everyone is aware of recommended infection control practices in the facility.
 - Place visual alerts, such as signs and posters in appropriate languages, at entrances and in strategic places, about hand hygiene, respiratory hygiene (including mask requirements) and cough etiquette.
 - Consider dating alerts to demonstrate that they reflect current recommendations.
 - Establish a process to make everyone entering the facility aware that **the following categories of visitors are not permitted:**
 - Visitors who have COVID-19 symptoms or a known close contact with a COVID-19 positive person within the last **10 days**, *regardless* of their vaccination status or personal history of COVID-19 infection.
 - Visitors who have had a positive COVID-19 test and have **not** met DC Health criteria for discontinuation of isolation in healthcare settings.

Personal protective equipment (PPE) guidelines/Visitation during isolation or empiric transmission-based precautions

- Visitors should bring their own masks. If a visitor arrives to the healthcare facility without a mask, facilities must provide one for them.
 - Masks must cover the nose and mouth and fit snugly to the face.
 - Masks with exhalation valves are not permitted.
 - More information on masks for visitors can be found at cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/types-of-masks.html.
- Additional PPE is generally not indicated for visitors unless they visit a COVID-19 positive or PUI patient (e.g.: during a compassionate care visit or for those essential to support persons with disabilities).

⁵ For the rest of this guidance, the term mask will be used to refer to either masks or respirators.

Considerations for individuals visiting a COVID-19 positive or PUI patient:

- Facilities must provide **ALL** necessary PPE for the visit.
 - Visitors should not be issued N95 respirators as they are not appropriately fit tested; however, they are permitted to wear an N95 if they bring one.
 - Staff must be available for periodic check-ins during the visit to ensure appropriate PPE use and to provide “just in time” teaching as needed.
- Visitors must be informed of the risks associated with visiting a COVID-19 positive or PUI patient:
 - Inform visitors that visiting a COVID-19 positive patient longer than 15 minutes cumulatively in a 24-hour period is considered an exposure.
 - Inform visitors of PUI patients that they should monitor themselves for symptoms for 10 days following the visit or until the patient is cleared (whichever is less).
 - For more information, ***Guidance After Exposure to a Person Confirmed to have COVID-19: Precautions, Quarantine and Testing at coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance***.

Additional facility guidelines

- When allowing visitation, facilities must:
 - Provide adequate and easily accessible access to soap and water and alcohol-based hand rub (ABHR) with 60-95% alcohol.
 - Minimize time visitors spend in common areas (e.g., waiting rooms) and use visual cues to help prevent congregating.
 - Have a written policy in place to ensure that:
 - Only the appropriate number of visitors is allowed per person and/or per designated space.
 - Visitors with cough or other respiratory symptoms are instructed to immediately leave the facility and seek care if needed.
 - Visitors are provided with contact information and additional instructions for notifying the facility should they develop symptoms of or test positive for COVID-19 within 10 days of their visit.
 - Visitors are aware of the hospital’s right to cancel, delay or deny a scheduled visitation.
 - Ensure staff are available to monitor visitor compliance with infection control precautions (e.g., proper mask use when required, hand hygiene before and after visitation) to allow for “just in time” teaching as needed.

The guidelines above will continue to be updated as the outbreak evolves. Please visit coronavirus.dc.gov/healthguidance regularly for the most current information.