



## **Answers to Frequently Asked Questions About COVID-19 Information for Nursing Homes**

Updated: November 30, 2022

### **Healthcare Personnel**

#### **Are recommendations for use of N-95s and face shields/goggles by healthcare personnel (HCP) based on vaccination status or previous infection history?**

Facilities should implement broad use of respirators and eye protection by HCP during patient care encounters when [Rhode Island community transmission](#) (case rates) is high ( $\geq 100$  cases per 100,000 people per week). Eye protection recommendations are not based on individual's vaccination status.

However, Rhode Island regulations ([216-RICR-20-15-7](#)) require that healthcare workers are either up to date with their COVID-19 vaccines or wear a National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)-approved N-95 mask while working in healthcare facilities when COVID-19 [community transmission](#) (case rates) is substantial or higher ( $\geq 50$  cases per 100,000 people per week).

#### **What is the definition of “patient care encounter?”**

In line with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) guidance, the Rhode Island Department of Health (RIDOH) recommends that staff should wear eye protection during “patient care encounters.” A patient care encounter refers to when staff are within arm's reach of residents to interact and provide care (e.g., medication administration, bathing, meals, repositioning, transferring, etc.). For consideration, any staff member who would be identified as a close contact for COVID-19 exposure because they were within six feet for cumulative period of 15 minutes or more within 24 hours would also be considered as having a patient care encounter.

### **Source Control (Masking)**

#### **When should nursing home staff wear eye protection and N-95 masks?**

Nursing homes should consider masks for everyone in areas of patient care and broad use of respirators and eye protection by staff in patient care encounters when [community transmission](#) (case rates) is high ( $\geq 100$  cases per 100,000 people per week).

Rhode Island regulations ([216-RICR-20-15-7](#)) require that healthcare workers are up to date with their COVID-19 vaccines or wear a NIOSH-approved N-95 mask while working in healthcare facilities when COVID-19 [community transmission](#) (case rates) is substantial or higher ( $\geq 50$  cases per 100,000 people per week).

Additionally, staff should follow recommendations for masking at all community transmission levels when they're exposed to someone with COVID-19 or there's an uncontrolled outbreak.

### **Should long-term residents wear masks when out of their rooms?**

Everyone in nursing homes, including residents, should use source control (masking) when [community transmission](#) (case rates) is high ( $\geq 100$  cases per 100,000 people per week).

Residents who have compromised immune systems or who are at high risk for severe disease should be counseled about strategies to protect themselves and others, including recommendations for source control. Age (65 and older) remains one of the predictors for worse outcomes and CDC and RIDOH strongly encourage residents to mask in common areas or when in close contact with others.

### **What's the difference between community transmission and COVID-19 Community Levels regarding masking for staff?**

In most circumstances, nursing homes will base decisions about masking at work on community transmission (case rates) in Rhode Island. They are updated on the [Congregate Care page](#) on RIDOH's COVID-19 Data Response Portal.

- All nursing home and assisted living residence (ALR) staff should wear NIOSH-approved N-95 masks/respirators and eye protection in patient care areas **when community transmission (case rate) is high** ( $\geq 100$  cases per 100,000 people per week).
- All healthcare personnel who are not up to date with their COVID-19 vaccines **must** wear N-95 masks when **community transmission (case rate) is substantial or higher** ( $\geq 50$  cases/100,000 people per week).

### **Can nursing homes require visitors and residents to wear masks?**

No. Nursing homes have a responsibility to educate, encourage, and model best practices for infection prevention and control. Residents and visitors may decide to remove source control during a visit when in a private area (away from staff and other residents). Facilities should educate visitors, residents, and staff, that source control is the top mitigation strategy to protect all.

## **Screening**

### **Should residents be screened for COVID-19 symptoms daily?**

Nursing home facilities are required to screen residents for COVID-19 symptoms daily. The screening process may differ by facility, however, all facilities must provide documentation of a screening process.

## **Empiric Transmission-Based Precautions**

### **How do empiric transmission-based precautions differ from isolation and/or quarantine?**

Empiric transmission-based precautions are measures of infection control used in addition to standard precautions. Empiric transmission-based precautions are used when a patient or resident has a known or suspected infection with a pathogen that requires additional measures of precaution. Isolation is used when someone has tested positive for COVID-19. Quarantine was previously used when someone was identified a close contact exposure.

### **Should residents be moved if they share a room with someone who tests positive for COVID-19?**

Isolation in a private room with a private bath remains best practice for anyone who tests positive for COVID-19. Roommates who test negative should be moved to prevent continued exposure and risk. Cohorting residents who test positive for COVID-19 is acceptable.

### **Admissions (new residents and those returning from leave that is longer than 24 hours)**

#### **Since admissions are no longer required to quarantine, what should they do?**

All admissions (new admissions and residents returning from a leave that was longer than 24 hours) should **wear a mask for 10 days** and **test negative on three antigen tests taken 48 hours apart**. No extra precautions are recommended for admissions who aren't up to date with their COVID-19 vaccines and/or who are arriving from an in-patient hospitalization.

The facility is encouraged to use empiric transmission-based precautions if the person admitted can't follow recommendations for testing or wearing a mask for 10 days, if the person admitted has a moderately or severely compromised immune system, or if the person admitted is on a unit with an uncontrolled outbreak.

### **Should nursing homes test admissions on the day of arrival and again later despite exposure and or vaccination status?**

Yes, CDC and RIDOH recommend new admissions (and residents return after more than 24 hours) use source control for 10 days and are tested three times (day 1, 3, 5), regardless of vaccination status. This is now recommended because science and data show that immunity wanes and that previous infection doesn't offer much information about risk levels because many people have had infection.

## **Visitation**

### **Should visitors be screened before entering nursing homes?**

Nursing homes are required to have screening processes. Screening protocols may differ across facilities. Facilities may choose active or passive screening processes for staff and visitors.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, CDC, and RIDOH all recommend screening visitors, staff, and residents. Screening offers an opportunity to inquire if visitors have symptoms, exposures, tested positive, and to educate visitors on vaccination, hand hygiene, distancing, and source control. Visitors should be educated to stay up to date with their COVID-19 vaccines.

## **Testing**

### **How do we report self-tests (taken at home)?**

Self-test results should be reported in the self-test portal by the person tested. Facilities should encourage staff to self-report. In addition to submitting results through the self-test portal, RIDOH also requires nursing homes to notify RIDOH of known positive test results by sending an email with name, date of birth, test type, and test date to [RIDOH.COVID19LTC@health.ri.gov](mailto:RIDOH.COVID19LTC@health.ri.gov).

## **Outbreaks**

### **Do we expect that the outbreak definition will change (i.e., more than one case)?**

RIDOH remains aligned with CDC on the definition of an outbreak for long-term care settings (an outbreak is defined as more than one case of COVID-19).

COVID-19 remains a reportable disease. It's still important to have a low threshold to assess and intervene for vulnerable populations. While this may evolve over time, we're not aware of plans to change the definition currently.

## **Vaccination**

### **Has Rhode Island adopted CDC's recommendations for staying up to date with COVID-19, including the bivalent vaccine booster if eligible?**

Yes. Rhode Island remains aligned with CDC's recommendations to stay up to date with COVID-19 vaccines, including the bivalent vaccine booster if eligible. RIDOH strongly encourages everyone to stay up to date with their COVID-19 vaccines as a leading tool to protect against serious illness.

Currently, Rhode Island does not require residents or staff to get the bivalent vaccine booster dose. However, Rhode Island regulations ([216-RICR-20-15-7](#)) require that healthcare workers and ALR workers who are not up to date with their COVID-19 vaccines wear a NIOSH-approved N-95 mask while working in healthcare facilities when COVID-19 [community transmission](#) (case rates) is substantial or higher ( $\geq 50$  cases per 100,000 people per week). For more information on these regulations, please visit [covid.ri.gov/vaxrequirement](https://covid.ri.gov/vaxrequirement).

**Does contracting COVID-19 change the recommendations for staying up to date with COVID-19 vaccines, including booster doses?**

RIDOH recommends that everyone stay up to date with their vaccines, even if they've had COVID-19. In line with CDC recommendations, a clinical decision can be made to postpone vaccination for up to 90 days after testing positive. However, the bivalent vaccine booster is due on day 91 to be considered up to date with COVID-19 vaccines.

Data show that the vaccine booster dose offers broader protection even after COVID-19 infection, as measured by antibodies. While infection does "boost" an immune response in the clinical sense, it should never be documented as a booster.