

COVID-19 testing not required for nursing home visitors

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By Kaitlin Schroeder

Ohioans visiting their loved ones in nursing homes or assisted living facilities are not legally required to be tested for COVID-19 ahead of time.

Ohio's Office of the State Long-term Care Ombudsman recently said visitors should also not be charged for testing at the facility. The ombudsman urged visitors and residents to contact that office if they are charged for COVID-19 testing.

Chip Wilkins, Dayton-based long-term care ombudsman who advocates for resident rights, said if families and love ones encounter any visiting barriers related to testing requirements, they should call their local ombudsman who can help them.

"We have probably two bigger corporate groups that are trying to get anyone visiting to undergo their quick testing. And we have told them, time and again now, that that is absolutely not required by the state guidelines and they are adding more to the guideline than there are," Wilkins said.

Pete Van Runkle, executive director of the Ohio Health Care Association, which represents nursing homes and assisted living facilities, said testing cannot be a requirement for visitation. Visitors also cannot be required to be vaccinated.

"Both testing and vaccination are strongly encouraged, of course, by both the state and federal governments, but they don't require them and don't allow facilities to require either," Van Runkle said.

Earlier this month the Ohio Department of Health relaxed many of the visiting restrictions, following new guidance from the federal government.

Changes include:

- Ohio is requiring that visitation be permitted whenever safety protocols can be met. Previously, visitation was permitted, not required.
- Vaccinated residents may have physical touch with their visitor while wearing a mask. Previously, touch was discouraged.
- Visits may occur in a resident's private room, as opposed to the previous requirement of a separate visitation area.
- 30 minutes should serve as the minimum amount of time for a visit. Previously, 30 minutes was the maximum time to visit.

The general visitation requirements will remain the same, including the requirement that visitors schedule appointments in advance, are screened at the door, and wear masks

Older long-term care residents were particularly hard hit by the devastation of the pandemic and isolating pandemic restrictions. People living in long-term care facilities represent about 1% of the U.S. but yet were one in three COVID-19 deaths. The residents are typically both medically vulnerable to serious complications from the virus. They also live in close quarters so COVID-19 can silently enter a facility and spread quickly [even in highly-rated facilities where staff follow protocols](#).

But now the pandemic has turned a corner in long-term care. All residents were offered vaccines and all the vaccines authorized in the U.S. have so far offered complete protection against dying from COVID-19.

Nationally nearly 1.4 million nursing home residents and more than 930,000 staffers have been fully vaccinated, the Associated Press reported on March 10. Deaths among residents fell to 1,112 the week ending March 7 compared to 7,042 the week ending Dec. 20.

Wilkins said the current situation is still hard for families, who want to visit like they used to.

“And as you can imagine, families and residents are beyond frustrated now that most are fully vaccinated and still can’t visit as freely as they were hoping,” Wilkins said.

Associated Press contributed to this report.

How to get help

Ohio’s Office of the State Long-term Care Ombudsman can provide free help to residents families running into barriers with in-person visiting or who have questions about their rights. If you need help scheduling a visit, contact the Long-Term Care Ombudsman at OhioOmbudsman@age.ohio.gov or 800-282-1206.