

A photograph of two healthcare workers, a man and a woman, both wearing blue bouffant hairnets and white surgical masks. They are dressed in light blue scrubs. The woman on the left is wearing a green scrub top, while the man on the right is wearing a light blue scrub top and has a stethoscope around his neck. They are both looking down at a blue clipboard held by the man. The background is a bright, out-of-focus indoor setting, likely a hospital or clinic.

Infection Prevention Post-Pandemic:

10 Tips

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What You'll Learn

The novel coronavirus upended long-term care policies and practices, requiring facilities to quickly pivot to slow the spread of the disease that disproportionately affected the country's seniors. While the number of cases has declined considerably since their peak due to the availability of COVID-19 vaccines for staff and residents, other threats remain, from new strains of the virus to additional infectious diseases. With the pandemic shining a spotlight on infection prevention and control, learn how to assess your facility's protocols and best prepare for future outbreaks.



Health Threats Beyond COVID-19

It is estimated that
1 to 3 million

serious infections occur every year in:

- nursing homes
 - skilled nursing facilities
 - assisted living facilities
- CDC

Even before the pandemic, good infection control in long-term care was essential to preventing transmission of infectious diseases. And that holds true post-COVID-19 as well. As quickly as COVID-19 spread around the globe, another outbreak could be looming. In fact, some of the potential health hazards that already exist include:

Pneumonia: Pneumonia remains a leading cause of morbidity and mortality in older adults, with recent data from the CDC showing that hospitalizations for pneumonia among 65 to 84 year olds have increased. A person can spread the germs that cause pneumonia when they cough and expel the virus or bacteria.

Influenza A and B, including the A variant:

According to the CDC, an estimated 70-85% of seasonal flu-related deaths have been among people 65 and older and 50-70% of hospitalizations have occurred in this group. Bronchitis and pneumonia are the most common respiratory complications of influenza infection.

In January, the first influenza A (H3N2v) (“swine flu”) virus in 2021 was identified in the US. Just 437 human infections with influenza A (H3N2v) have been reported in the US since 2005

— World Health Organization (WHO)

Group A Streptococcus: This species of bacteria causes many different infections, such as strep throat and scarlet fever. When the bacteria enter the blood or muscle, severe, life-threatening infections like sepsis can occur. Residents in long-term care facilities are at increased risk of serious, invasive Group A streptococcus infections due to their advanced age and underlying medical conditions.

Norovirus: *Long-term care facilities are the most common settings for norovirus outbreaks.* It is very contagious. In fact, according to a study in Clinical Infectious Diseases, norovirus GII, the most common genogroup, is often present in the air at facilities during outbreaks of the virus. Outbreaks can occur anywhere people gather or food is served since infected individuals can spread norovirus to others through close contact or by contaminating food and surfaces.

Over half

of all norovirus outbreaks reported in the US occur in long-term care facilities.

— CDC

COVID-19 Variants: Several variants of the virus that causes COVID-19 are circulating. These include the United Kingdom variant (B.1.1.7), South Africa variant (B.1.351) and Brazil variant (P.1). These variants, according to the CDC, appear to spread more easily and quickly than other variants.

With the potential for infection outbreaks from contagious bacteria or viruses like these, it is critical for a facility to focus on prevention and preparedness.

Combatting the Spread of Infectious Diseases

Residents of long-term care facilities who are of advanced age and/or have underlying health conditions are at greatest risk of severe health consequences from infectious diseases. The need for robust prevention practices is paramount to minimize the impact of outbreaks. Moreover, preparedness can help your facility avoid steep fines following infection-control focused surveys.

Here are 10 tips to prevent an outbreak before it occurs:

- **Conduct a self-assessment:** Both CMS and LeadingAge offer self-assessment tools on their website to help you review your preparedness and gaps that need to be addressed.
- **Prepare for surveys:** Run mock surveys and maintain a survey book that is current and contains required documentation.
- **Have a full-time, well-trained infection preventionist:** required since November 2019, be sure you designate one or more individuals to lead your facility's infection prevention and control.
- **Ensure adequate resources:** To prevent transmission of infectious diseases, either by contact, air or droplets, ensure available protection for staff with the availability of PPE such as N95 masks and eye protection.





Combating the Spread of Infectious Diseases

- **Encourage vaccination:** All residents should receive flu, pneumonia and COVID-19 vaccines per the recommended guidelines.
- **Perform active surveillance:** If there is illness activity in the local community, conduct active, daily surveillance among new and current residents, staff and visitors.
- **Test:** When a resident has signs or symptoms of a respiratory illness, administer influenza and COVID-19 testing per CDC guidelines or those from your state agency.
- **Establish infection prevention standards:** Using a multidisciplinary approach, create a framework for infection prevention that addresses top areas of concern such as hand hygiene, cleaning and disinfection, and use of PPE.
- **Educate:** While an outbreak can be easier to detect when residents become sick within a short period of time, it can be more difficult to identify when the time between cases is long. Instruct staff on how to recognize and report signs and symptoms of infectious diseases among residents and themselves.
- **Follow reporting requirements:** Be sure that you notify, as required, local or state health departments of suspected outbreaks or, in the case of COVID-19, the CDC.

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