

Communal Dining Guidance During a Pandemic (i.e. COVID-19)

A memo from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) dated March 13, 2020 recommends guidance that facilities “cancel communal dining and all group activities”. This advisement is for skilled nursing facilities however, it is also strongly encouraged in assisted living, independent living, and other settings/communities that provide services to older adults and/or immunocompromised individuals. Facilities and communities should take all reasonable steps to implement this recommendation, knowing the potential consequences of the spread of COVID-19 in these vulnerable populations.

A key reason for this guidance is linked to the concept of “social distancing” to reduce the spread of respiratory viruses. Social distancing is recommended for everyone. Social distancing is purposely limiting the number of people in close proximity to each other for periods of time; keeping people 6 feet apart helps limit the spread of illness. Communal dining places residents in close proximity to each other, and this is what we need to avoid. However, we do not want to completely isolate residents in their rooms if at all possible.

Implementation of this CMS recommendation will be unique in each facility, based on physical plant, staff availability, and resident needs. It will likely require enlisting other staff members to assist. Staffing patterns may also need to be altered.

Here are some recommendations and possible approaches being recommended by health care organizations:

1. Handwashing and hygiene before, during and after meals is imperative for everyone – staff and residents.
2. Provide in-room meal service for residents that are capable of feeding themselves independently.
3. For residents at risk of choking or aspiration:
 - a. Provide meals in their rooms with proper supervision
 - b. If these residents will continue to eat in a common area, they should be at least 6 feet from others and with as few other residents as possible during their mealtime.
 - c. Due to the risk of coughing with these residents, staff should take appropriate precautions with eye protection and gowns while assisting these residents.
4. If you do continue to bring residents into a common area for dining, this needs to be done in intervals to maintain social distancing.
 - a. Separate tables at least six (6) feet apart.
 - b. Residents may need to sit at tables by themselves to ensure social distancing between residents.
 - c. If necessary, pair roommates or others who are together outside of mealtimes at a table together.

Communal Dining Guidance During a Pandemic (i.e. COVID-19)

- d. Offer meals in shifts to reduce the number of residents eating together, and create social distancing.
5. Residents who need assistance with eating should be spaced 6 feet or more apart.
 - a. If providing assistance for more than one resident at a time, staff must either wash their hands or use hand sanitizer each time they switch to provide assistance between residents.

Notes:

- The CMS memo emphasizes no visitation of non-essential health care personnel, unless for compassionate care visits (end-of-life). Some health care organizations are suggesting that facilities may need to consider use of volunteers or other paid personnel to accomplish food service, saying this can be viewed as essential and not as visitors. These volunteers would have to undergo screening upon entry and adhere to frequent handwashing or use of alcohol-based hand rub.
- The primary focus for staff will need to be: (1) necessary medical treatment; (2) hygiene; (3) hydration; and (4) meal service. These may take all of the staff's time.