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Advancing infection prevention in senior communities



Proactive practices for protecting residents from both the common and unexpected

Today, many administrators – bolstered by the widespread adoption of vaccines and the introduction of new medicines – may naturally turn their attention from infection prevention to ongoing financial and staffing challenges. But it's more important than ever to not lose sight of the very positive momentum that has been made in basic infection control.

That's why now is the time to take advantage of the heightened awareness of infection prevention by turning what have become common prevention protocols into long-term plans that maintain simple, everyday controls and checklists to keep residents, family and staff happy and healthy.

Some senior communities have reported an increase in colds and flu among residents and staff because exposure, and thus immunity, to everyday infections decreased when mask mandates and other pandemic restrictions were in place.

"There have been very important lessons learned about addressing situations early, communicating with families, figuring out ways to put and keep infection control strategies in place. It's about not just purely reacting to what's going on, but being more proactive," said the Optum national medical director for Senior Community Care.

Hopefully, these plans will never be needed for another pandemic. But many of the practices that became commonplace during that time can go a long way toward preventing flu, colds, norovirus and other outbreaks that often needlessly send residents to the hospital.

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Balancing social interaction with safety



Assisted living communities face unique challenges in infection prevention because of their business model that focuses on independent living and social engagement. That means residents often come and go as they please and interact frequently with people well beyond their community.

This makes it much harder to monitor for outbreaks, both by the nature of the freer movement and the fact that controls and resources vary widely from property to property and state to state.

Historically, there has been little government supervision of assisted living communities because they are more social, like apartment complexes. Whether senior living communities have medical staff on hand also varies widely.

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Tap outside experts for maximum results



That's where Optum can help. The Optum care model and UHC Care Advantage, the associated specialized Medicare Advantage plan, bring health plan benefits, clinical support and expertise to residents in senior living communities. The dedicated care team works one-on-one with residents to support and coordinate their health care needs.

Optum nurse practitioners and physician assistants work closely with on-site staff and every region has certified infection-prevention specialists to assist community staff (who often have no medical background) develop proactive plans to keep residents healthy.

In addition to helping senior communities create simple but effective infection prevention plans, Optum advanced practice clinicians also provide education on identifying common infections early.

They teach staff and residents about important topics like antibiotic resistance and offer simple steps to prevent and manage common infections that often needlessly send residents to the emergency room.

"It's an ongoing communication," said associate director of UHC Care Advantage. "One big educational push we did was on urinary tract infections (UTIs). A lot of times people will think they have a UTI. But maybe they just need to drink more water. Or maybe they need some assistance with hygiene. We are giving people strategies to recognize subtle changes and preventive measures to implement in order to prevent an infection."

On average, communities that partner with Optum see a 42% reduction in hospitalizations leading to unnecessary move-outs and a 5-month longer length of stay than the national average.[1]

1. 2019-2020 IESNP results.

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Infection prevention 101



One thing the pandemic taught us is the importance of basic infection control – from getting staff to wash their hands thoroughly with soap and water instead of just relying on alcohol-based sanitizers, to making sure communities have backup plans and sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE) on hand for the unexpected.

Encourage staff and residents to scrub their hands for at least 20 seconds. Hum the "Happy Birthday" song from beginning to end twice.[1]

1. When and how to wash your hands. CDC.gov. Last reviewed: April 11, 2023.

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Here are the top 7 “must dos” for staff, residents and families:

Staff

1. Make basic infection control part of the employee onboarding process.
2. Emphasize the need to use soap and water whenever possible, not just sanitizing gels.
3. Train staff on keeping communal areas and surfaces clean.
4. Educate and build into employee literature information about the importance of staying home if not feeling well.
5. Encourage vaccines; hold clinics.
6. Mandate masks and clean gloves when dealing with residents (particularly in memory care) who aren’t feeling well.
7. Take employee temperatures on arrival during flu or other outbreaks.

Residents

1. Encourage regular wellness/preventive health care checks.
2. Remind them about the need to stay in/mask if not feeling well.
3. Post signage about basic cleanliness.
4. Alert them when there are community outbreaks.
5. Encourage vaccines through ongoing clinics and education.
6. Hold wellness/prevention events with experts from the community.
7. Make sure they have the technology and training to use tools to stay in touch with family and doctors virtually when they are ill or there are community outbreaks.

Families

1. Hold family nights that include a session on basic steps and the importance of infection control.
2. Invite them to vaccination clinics.
3. Send occasional reminders about basic protocols when visiting.
4. Remind them not to come or bring the kids if they have the sniffles.
5. Take visitor temperatures on arrival during community outbreaks.
6. Include them on alerts about community outbreaks and other infection control updates.
7. Encourage mask wearing if there are seasonal or other outbreaks in the area.

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Seize the opportunity



The pandemic created heightened awareness across the board about infection prevention, preventive health care, community engagement and the importance of vaccines.

It's also spurred more collaboration.

The national medical director for Senior Community Care at Optum said that, "Going forward, I believe we'll see more group-think across the assisted living industry. Some assisted living environments were more successful than others at reducing spread. So, we need to keep learning from each other and working together instead of everybody operating in their own little world."

The key, she said, "is to build on the awareness of simple prevention tactics, such as screening visitors if there are community or seasonal threats.

If something is going around, limit the revolving door at the front desk. You can ask visitors questions. Have they been ill recently? Have they had a fever? Implement measures to limit comings and goings from being a free-for-all."

The pandemic has lead to more regulation of assisted living communities. And that's not necessarily a bad thing.

"It means more training for staff and perhaps more expectations of what can be done in the assisted living space," she said. "I can see that happening only because it's protective of the resident."

And in the end, that's what it's all about: protecting residents. That's why now is the time to keep building proactive infection prevention programs that turn lessons learned into best practices that are part of a culture focused on keeping residents healthy and at home in their communities.



The Optum care model and UHC Care Advantage, a specialized Medicare Advantage plan, bring health plan benefits, clinical support and expertise to residents in senior living communities. The model is led by a dedicated care team that works one-on-one with members to coordinate and support their physical and behavioral health care needs. Learn how this personalized model can benefit both you and your residents.

For more information, visit optum.com/seniorliving

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