

# Visiting a relative with dementia living in a care home



COVID-19 pandemic: Information on visiting a relative with dementia living in an MHA care home



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MHA would like to say thank you to John's Campaign for their help and support with the development of this leaflet. John's Campaign promotes the belief that family carers should not just be allowed but should be welcomed, and that a collaboration between people living with dementia and all connected with them is crucial to their health and wellbeing. For more information visit: <https://johnscampaign.org.uk/#/>



**Please note** detailed information can be found in the MHA document: '**Visiting Your Relative - Guidelines for family members and friends visiting their loved ones in an MHA Care Home**' Please refer to this before reading the following.

# Introduction

It is still early days but care homes are starting to support residents to see their families again. However, as many of our residents will still be at a higher risk of catching COVID-19 (Coronavirus) because of their age and / or other medical conditions, such as dementia, these visits will need to happen in a controlled way. Our approach to this will be individualised to ensure:

- The safety of residents, their visitors, and staff
- Shielding still occurs for certain residents;
- The risk of infection is minimised.

This document is based on questions raised by family members of residents living with dementia in MHA care homes. Every person's experience of dementia will be unique, and the following are just possible responses that you, as a family member or friend of someone living with dementia may have. They might help address some of your concerns, if they don't or you just want more advice please contact your relative's care home.

## What do I need to do before I visit?

You will need to contact the care home via telephone or email to let them know you want to arrange a visit. Please do not arrive unannounced. The care home will then contact you to:

- Confirm that you have been free of any symptoms of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) for at least 14 days.
- Ensure the care home has been free of COVID-19 (Coronavirus) for at least 14 days.
- Agree a time and date to visit your relative.
- Agree who will be visiting and for how long.
- Talk about the best way to travel to and from the home. You will be encouraged to come by car or walk rather than by public transport if at all possible.

- Discuss any items you wish to bring with you on your visit, such as a gift. It will need to be something that can be easily cleaned by the care home to prevent cross contamination. For example, it is unlikely that you will be able to bring flowers but a box of chocolates that could be sanitized with wipes would be allowed.
- Confirm that you have understood and agree to the visiting guidelines

This is a developing situation which we are trying to manage in the best interests of all. Please believe that we really want to see you back and visiting your relative again. If for any reason the home manager feels it would be unwise for some specific reason, they will do their best to explain and hope you will understand.



## How quickly can I see my family member?

We acknowledge and appreciate how supportive families have been during this difficult time and we recognise that you will want to see your relative as soon as possible. Please be patient with our staff while they are facilitating these meetings as we are trying to ensure residents can see their family safely.

## What might the first visit be like?

Staff, who will be wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), will show you how to put on the PPE if required. This may include gloves, a face mask, face shield and / or an apron. The care home will provide you with the PPE, you will not have to bring your own. It is also possible that your relative will be wearing PPE.

Also, you may be asked to:

- Have the visit in the garden where social distancing can be retained.
- Some care homes may have a form of partition between you and your relative to enable a physical distance to be maintained. This may be a garden table, a garden fence, a gazebo, or a Perspex screen (similar to ones you may have seen in supermarkets).
- Be one of only two people from your family to visit.

It is likely that staff will be with you and your relative living with dementia during the visit. This is to get refreshments, advise on infection control measures and support if needed.

At the end of the visit the Staff will show you how to remove and dispose of the PPE. You will be asked to wash and dry your hands again. If this is not possible hand sanitizer will be given.

## How will my relative recognise me if have to wear a face mask?

You may not have to wear a face mask if:

- You are meeting outside and a physical distance of 6 feet (2 metres) is maintained throughout the visit.
- There is a physical barrier between you and your relative. For example, your relative in the care home looking through a window and you are outside.

Please ensure this is agreed before visiting.

If you do have to wear a face mask during your time with your family member it is worth thinking about:

- Speaking louder and clearer.
- Your tone of voice and the message it conveys.
- Writing information down for your relative to read, if they can.
- Using gestures / signs to communicate.
- Keeping eye contact.
- Not wearing a hat or anything else that conceals your face further.
- Wearing clothing that your relative may recognise.
- Having your hair in a style that your relative is familiar with.

You may also want to create something which explains to your relative why you are wearing a mask, such as the example shown.



Hello, Mum.

It is David. **It is lovely to see you.**

I am wearing this face mask because there is a nasty bug going around.

This face mask is to try and **stop us from becoming ill.**

## What about if my relative with dementia wants to cuddle or touch me?

The reality is that not everyone living with dementia will understand the need to maintain a physical distance and may want to greet you with some sort of physical contact. This response is understandable after not seeing each other for a long time. Because of this we will need to consider different options to reflect each individual resident, their understanding, needs and rights. For example, some residents living with dementia may just need a gentle reminder from yourself and a staff member. However, if a resident doesn't understand or is unlikely to understand and becomes distressed by not having this contact, we will then have to consider how we can do this in a way that is as safe as possible. For instance we would:

- Enable the visit to be outside in the garden.
- Look at minimal physical contact to begin with, such as handholding.
- Ask you not to initiate physical contact unless it has been assessed it is safe to do so.

If it is believed that your relative will want to cuddle you, we will jointly discuss an agreed approach with you before the visit.

## Will my relative still remember me after all this time?

For many people the worry of a relative no longer recognising you can be overwhelming. But it is important to stress that despite the time spent apart many people living with dementia will remember their relatives and friends. However, some people living with dementia may struggle at first.

If the person with dementia doesn't recognise you straight away, try not to worry and give your relative time to remember. It may take more than the initial meeting for those memories to be reconnected to you. Also, you might need to:

- Re-introduce yourself and remind them of the relationship between the two of you.
- Consider taking with you an object that you can give to your relative / friend with dementia which will remind them of the connection the two of you have. As mentioned earlier, this would need to be something that could be easily sanitized by the care home. For example, a meaningful photograph could be laminated or placed into a wipe able document.
- Talk about the distant past first rather than the recent months. By doing this you are more likely to make your relative feel at ease because they may find it easier to recall long term memories.
- If safe to do so, touch can be used to help with recall. Holding a hand can make a massive difference but you will need to check with staff if this is safe to do so at this time. You and your relative may be asked to wear gloves and wash and dry your hands.

If, despite all of your attempts your relative doesn't recognise you remember that their emotions still remain. They will still benefit from seeing your friendly face, hearing your voice, and enjoying your company even if they are not sure who you are.

If your relative cannot remember your connection, try not to convince them or correct them about your relationship. For example, if you are their daughter but they call you mum try not to contradict this. Remember despite the difference in the words they still often have the same feelings connected to them i.e. love, trust and friendship.

It is also probably worth not talking about COVID-19 unless your relative brings up the topic or you need to explain why you haven't been able to visit.

## What about if my relative wants to walk around the home with me?

It is possible that your relative will want to walk with you. In this case it is probable that you will be asked to wear gloves and a face mask and stay in the garden rather than walking around the home. We would ask you to maintain social distancing whilst doing so.

## What if my family member is angry at me for not visiting?

Even if you have had regular contact with your family member, they may have forgotten about the restrictions and blame you for not visiting. If this is a possibility then it is worth calling your relative just before your visit to explain why you were not able to visit. Also, at the visit you might need to remind your relative why you haven't been. You may have to keep your explanation simple, such as the following:

*"There has been a bug going around that can make people feel very unwell. To keep you safe I wasn't able to come and see you."*

Or;

*"To try and stop the spread of the virus the Government told us that we had to stay at home."*

Or;

*"Older people were at a greater risk from catching this nasty illness, so we had to keep away to keep you and the other residents safe."*

Many older people may have had to quarantine in their childhood due to illness such as measles. Because of this try and use words that your relative may be more familiar with such as 'infection' or 'quarantine'.

If your family member does not understand, rather than trying to persuade them it might be better to apologise, for example, saying *"I am really sorry I didn't come"*.

## What if my family member's dementia has worsened since I last saw them?

It is possible that your relative's dementia may have changed. But it is also worth recognising that these changes may be a result of what the person living with dementia has been through. All of us have been affected by the lockdown and this equally true of people living with dementia. It is possible that as things return to normal your relative will.

Nevertheless, for some people living with dementia there will have been a cognitive decline. The key thing is to try and not feel guilty about this; there is nothing that you could have done to prevent this. These changes in a person's brain, is part of their dementia journey, and continue despite the change and extraordinary times we are all going through.

If your relative's dementia has worsened you may need to adopt some different approaches and communication techniques. The person living with dementia may need longer to respond to your questions or need more help to do things. But maintaining that relationship with your relative is just as important now as it was before the pandemic.

## What if I don't feel able to go and see my relative?

Feeling nervous or anxious about seeing your relative face to face again is a normal response to the situation you have been through. Only go and see your relative living with dementia when you feel able. Over the past few months everyone has been through an emotional rollercoaster so it is understandable that although you can see your relative again you may not want to. It is worth speaking to the staff at the home about some of the small steps you can take to build up to that first visit. The staff at the home will continue to care for your relative and they will not judge your decision not to go.

Consider if it is the thought of seeing your relative again that is the cause of anxiety, or is it the thought of going back into the care home? Again it is perfectly normal to feel anxious about returning to a place that may have been through such difficult times. The care home itself may have changed significantly since your last visit. Seeing staff in full PPE may be a clear reminder of the difficulties the home has gone through. The staff, residents and their families may have lost someone to COVID-19.

It is likely that over the time you have visited your relative you have become close to other residents. If these residents have died since your last visit then it is likely to have an emotional impact on you. You may even feel guilty that your relative has survived while others have died or been very ill. This is an understandable reaction.

If there have been deaths as a result of COVID-19 within the home it is very likely that some form of memorial will occur. It is worth asking the manager of the home about this and, if you want to, how you can be involved to show your respects.



## Will my visit be too upsetting for my relative with dementia?

When you see your relative again it will most likely be a very emotive time for both of you. However, try not to be too upset if your relative doesn't seem really happy to see you. Your relative may not be aware that they have not seen you for such a long time. Dementia affects a person's perception of time, so in their reality they might have only seen you this morning. Try not to worry about showing your emotions in front of your relative living with dementia. Your relative will probably sense the strong emotions that have been evoked as a result of the reunion. Explain the emotions shown are because you love them and it is good to see them. Remember that the Chaplain is available for both you and your relative if you need support. If they are not on site at the time of the visit, a member of staff will be able to pass on a message.

## What about after the first meeting?

It is likely that this reunion will have a big emotional impact on you and your relative. It is a big deal so try and ensure that you have someone you can talk to afterwards. Don't be surprised if you feel down after the meeting. This is an understandable response to the situation you have been through.

Furthermore, it is worth thinking about taking an image of the visit so that this can be shown to your relative to remind them of the visit. Agree a time when you can visit again so your relative knows when to expect you. You could write this down and ask the staff to leave in a place for your relative to refer to. Arranging the date and time of the next visit will create a focus for your relative and you.

# Glossary

**Cross Contamination.** It is possible for COVID-19 to be passed to others via an object that has been touched / coughed or sneezed upon by an individual who has COVID-19. How long COVID-19 can remain on an object depend on a number of factors including what the object is made out of.

**Personal Protective Equipment (PPE):** This is the face masks, face shields, gloves and aprons doctors, nurses, care staff and others are wearing.

**Pandemic:** This is when a disease has spread around the world.

**Shielding:** Although lockdown measures have eased for many, people over 70 and / or have certain medical conditions are being asked to stay in their homes – in this case to stay in the care home.

**Social distancing:** Keeping a physical distance between people. It is suggested to keep 6 feet (2 metres) from others.

**Social isolation:** If a person is has symptoms or has tested positive for COVID-19 they are being asked to segregate themselves from other people. In the care homes this usually means residents are being asked to stay in their bedrooms.





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