

Let's protect what matters

Communicable Diseases Branch

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Residential aged care homes

Acute respiratory infections

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Stop the spread of respiratory illness in residential aged care homes

Residential aged care facilities can help reduce the spread of illness by sharing these simple vaccination and hygiene messages with staff, residents, families and visitors.

Get vaccinated

- Vaccination is the best way to prevent severe illness, complications and hospitalisation from acute respiratory infections.
- Getting a flu vaccine before the peak season (winter months) offers the best protection, however vaccination still helps if given later in the season.
- Influenza (flu), COVID-19 and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) vaccines are available through GPs, pharmacies and other immunisation service providers. Details on recommended vaccines are outlined on page 2.

Practice good hygiene

- Cover coughs and sneezes with tissues or the inside of your elbow.
- Throw used tissues into a bin straight away.
- Clean hands thoroughly and regularly with soap and water or hand sanitiser.
- Clean frequently touched surfaces such as door handles, taps, tables, remote controls, phones, laptops, benchtops and fridge doors. Clean your hands with soap and water after cleaning.
- Improve air flow by opening windows or increasing ventilation where possible.

Stay at home when unwell

- Staff and visitors should stay home when unwell to prevent spreading illness.

Prepare, identify, respond

Acute respiratory infections (ARIs) can spread quickly in residential aged care homes due to communal living, age and health condition of residents.

Viruses that cause ARIs include flu, COVID-19 and RSV. These viruses can disrupt aged care services and cause serious illness in residents, staff and the wider community.

Although the flu, COVID-19 and RSV are different viruses, the ways to prevent them from spreading are largely the same.

Residential aged care homes should prepare before the winter season to protect residents and staff and respond quickly if an outbreak occurs. **Let's protect what matters!**

1. Prepare – Vaccination and prevention

Prevention

- Prepare your facility for the annual flu vaccination program and discuss the benefits of vaccination to residents and staff.
- Make sure residents have timely access to recommended vaccines.
- The *Aged Care Act 2024* (Cth) and *Aged Care Rules 2025* (Cth) state that registered residential care providers, as a condition of registration, must provide residents and service staff free access to vaccines according to the National Immunisation Program Schedule, including influenza, COVID-19 and pneumococcal vaccines (NB: access to free shingles vaccine is included).
- Have clear consent processes for vaccination and anti-viral treatment for residents, particularly for those with a Power of Attorney.
- Confirm arrangements with preferred pathology providers regarding sample collection and testing.
- Maintain an effective infection prevention and control (IPC) program. This should include appointing an IPC lead within your facility. Make sure staff are trained each year on hand hygiene and regularly monitor personal protective equipment (PPE) practices.
- Make sure there is an adequate supply of PPE and other essential items.
- Keep outbreak management plans up to date.
- Discuss emergency and outbreak planning with residents and their families, including options for isolation if needed.
- Continue fulfilling the record keeping requirements relating to vaccinations for staff and residents as described in the aged care legislation.

Key Vaccine Information

Influenza

- The [Free Flu Vaccination Program](#) is available now for Queensland residents aged 6 months and over, until 30 September 2026.
- The [Free Nasal Flu Spray Immunisation Program](#) offers a needle-free nasal spray flu vaccine for children aged 2 to 5 years (before they turn 6) and children aged 6 to 17 years (inclusive) who struggle with getting a needle. The nasal spray flu vaccine brand is FluMist®, which has been used to vaccinate millions of children in the Northern Hemisphere (including UK and USA) over the last decade.
- Funded injectable flu vaccine is also available year-round for eligible Queensland residents under the National Immunisation Program.
- Priority groups for flu vaccination:
 - All children aged 6 months to 5 years
 - All adults aged 65 years and over
 - People aged 5 to 65 years at higher risk of severe illness:
 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
 - People with medical risk factors
 - During pregnancy.

Refer to the [Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation clinical advice for 2026](#).

COVID-19

- COVID-19 vaccination remains vital in protecting people at higher risk of severe illness. COVID-19 vaccines are free for all eligible individuals.
- A free COVID-19 primary course is recommended for:
 - People aged 18 years and older
 - Children aged 6 months to 18 years with medical risk factors.
- Booster doses every 6 or 12 months are recommended based on a person's age and risk of severe illness.

RSV

- Free RSV vaccines are available and recommended for all people 75 years and over and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people 60 years and over.
- RSV vaccines are also recommended and available privately for other high-risk groups. People should speak with their healthcare provider to see if it is right for them. Visit the [Australian Government's RSV webpage](#) for more information.
- Free RSV vaccines are available and recommended during pregnancy at 28 to 36 weeks and for eligible infants and children under 2 years.

Australian Immunisation Register (AIR) Access and Registration

- Residential Aged Care Homes can now access the AIR and are strongly encouraged to do so as an essential means to monitor and improve vaccination rates among residents.
- Two new resources are available on the Services Australia website to assist RACFs to gain access.
 - [e-Learning module](#) – Access and use the Australian Immunisation Register (AIR) for Residential Aged Care Facilities.
 - [Infographic](#) – Australian Immunisation Register (AIR) access for Residential Aged Care Facilities.

Vaccination requirements and visitor restrictions

- Visitors should be well and have no ARI symptoms before entering the facility.
- If a Visitor has tested positive for an infectious respiratory disease such as flu, COVID-19 or RSV, they should not visit until at least 7 days have passed since their onset of symptoms.
- The [Sector Code for Visiting in Aged Care Homes](#) is a nationally consistent approach that ensures residents can receive visitors while minimising the risk of spreading infections.
- Providers should regularly review ARI screening processes for staff and visitors based on the current ARI risk in their community. Refer to the [Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission advice on dealing with outbreaks](#).
- Registered providers of residential aged care services must adhere to the [Strengthened Quality Standards](#) as a condition of registration, including having an appropriate infection prevention and control system ([Infection prevention and control | Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission](#)). A recommended action is for the provider to implement disease screening and immunisation requirements for visitors.

Strategies to increase staff vaccination

- Ensure staff can access free vaccination across all shifts.
- Discuss the benefits of vaccination for both individuals and the wider community.
- Provide clear information linking staff vaccination policies with infection control policies and staff health programs.
- Consider incentives or recognition programs for vaccinated staff.

2. Identify – Monitor for symptoms and outbreaks

- Monitor staff and residents for ARI symptoms. These may include:
 - fever (may be absent in the elderly)
 - cough
 - difficulty breathing
 - runny or blocked nose
 - sore throat
 - muscle or joint pain
 - tiredness or extreme fatigue

- headache
- sometimes unusual stomach problems.
- change in baseline condition with or without other symptoms such as fever, headache, fatigue or vomiting and diarrhoea
- Exclude all staff and visitors with symptoms from the facility.
- If a resident develops ARI symptoms, isolate the resident and follow your facility's outbreak management plan including arranging prompt respiratory virus testing.
- Declare an outbreak and notify your local [Public Health Unit \(PHU\)](#) when:
 - 2 or more residents test positive within a 72-hour period for COVID-19, influenza, or RSV, or
 - 2 or more epidemiologically linked cases of acute respiratory illness (ARI) occur within a 72-hour period where influenza, COVID-19 and RSV have been excluded.
- Vaccination should not be delayed during an outbreak. Risk mitigation strategies should be used so staff and residents can still be vaccinated.

3. Respond – Seek support and act early

- An early and rapid outbreak response reduces the number of ill residents and staff.
- Providers should communicate early and regularly with residents, family and staff about the outbreak. Communication should include appropriate signage and provide advice on hand and respiratory hygiene requirements, visitation guidelines and PPE.
- Contact the [local PHU](#) early for advice and resources on managing outbreaks.

Resources

Queensland Health has created a collection of [downloadable resources](#). More resources will be added over the coming weeks.

Providers can access further advice through the following webpages:

- [Managing Infectious Respiratory Diseases in aged care](#)
- [National Guideline for the Prevention, Control and Public Health Management of Outbreaks of Acute Respiratory Infection in Residential Aged Care Homes | Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care](#)
- [Disease prevention in residential care facilities](#)
- [Information for aged care providers, workers and residents about COVID-19 vaccines](#)
- [Queensland Public Health Units](#)