

When Family Members are Hospitalized due to COVID-19

As the number of COVID-19 cases rises, hospitalizations will also increase. These hospitalizations can be extremely challenging not only for patients, but also for families who might experience distress due to uncertainty about a loved one's recovery, and also due to personal risk of contracting the disease. Additionally, family members may not be permitted to visit their loved ones in the hospital because of potential contagion, which creates difficult separations for everyone. Families may also feel stigmatized by others in their community for having a relative with the disease. Given those challenges, several strategies are suggested to help families cope while their relatives are hospitalized.

Managing Uncertainty and Elevated Distress

- Engage in health-promoting behaviors (e.g., exercise, social connectedness, relaxation strategies).
- Maintain routines related to meals and bedtimes.
- Remember that your loved one is receiving the necessary care to support their recovery and that the majority of hospitalized individuals are successfully treated and are able to return home.
- Obtain ready access to the patient's medical, legal, and financial documents during hospitalization should the need arise in his/her absence.
- Maintain contact with hospital personnel designated to provide updates on your family member's medical status.

x Families should expect delays in status updates as healthcare providers are busy helping patients during this outbreak.

x It is okay to advocate for yourself and your family to receive updates. Although providers want to keep you updated, they are very busy and may appreciate the reminder.

Staying Connected During Family Separations

- Remember that physical separation from loved ones is necessary to keep everyone safe and healthy.
- Keeping family members away from the hospital also allows healthcare teams to more effectively focus on caring for patients.
- Create opportunities to communicate safely with the hospitalized family member via text, telephone, email, or video chat.
- Have important conversations if health status deteriorates and prior to need for intubation.

x To understand last wishes.

x To provide opportunities to say goodbye.

Stigmatization from Others

■ People are understandably concerned about the virus spreading to themselves and their loved ones.

■ Evaluate each family member's current risk of exposure and determine if self-isolation is required.

x Confirm with your health care provider when your loved one and other family members are no longer at risk of spreading the virus.

x After all family members are cleared by healthcare providers, share this information with friends, neighbors, community members, and extended family, so they understand the family is not at risk of spreading the virus.

Communicating Effectively with Children

- Consider each child's age and developmental level when deciding the amount and nature of the information to share with them.
- Explain to children that it is unlikely that an otherwise healthy patient with COVID-19 will die, but do not overly reassure them or provide false assurance when a situation is dire.
- Provide children with updated information about the patient's status and inform them that the sick family member is receiving needed care.
- It is appropriate to let children know that adults also have concerns (e.g., "I understand. I'm concerned about Grandpa too, but we'll get through this together."), but don't burden them with unnecessary worries.
- Encourage children to create projects that promote positive thoughts of the person that is ill. Find creative ways to share these with the person in the hospital.

■ If a death occurs, the circumstances of the death should be explained to children using simple and clear language.

■ Remember that children are likely to model the emotional reactions of adult caregivers.