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**Interim guidance
for Red Cross and Red
Crescent staff and volunteers
working with older people
during COVID-19 response**

Photo: © Macedonian Red Cross

Introduction

The purpose of this document is to provide information to Red Cross Red Crescent staff and volunteers on how to engage with, inform and support older people to support older people in facing new challenges linked to COVID-19. This is a living document that will be updated as the situation evolves.

What can you find in this document?

- A. **Guidance** on how to engage and communicate with older people, including on how to use the key messages in section B.
- B. **Key messages** for older people. These key messages should be adapted to the local context as needed. Make sure that the messages you are selecting to use are suitable and culturally acceptable. Refer to trustable resources if you want to change and/or adapt the messages and ensure that information provided is always verified and updated. *These key messages are also made available separately on the IFRC Go platform*
- C. **Resources** to refer to if you need more information and tools.
 - Useful websites and other guidance
 - A suggested “pocket vocabular”

Please also refer to resources available in your own language(s). You might need to spend some time to compile a list of local resources to be aware of what is available in your community and to connect people to services and available resources.

Updated resources will be made available on the dedicated page for COVID-19 on the [IFRC go platform under the section headed “Older people”](#).



Remember: how you use the key messages for older people depends on the context your National Society is operating in and which (group of) older people you are trying to reach. Adjust how you use the recommendations and how you communicate with them, based on your situation. Adapt the messages if needed to the context and make sure that the ones you select to use are suitable and culturally acceptable.



Update the information as part of the key messages on how the older people can reach your National Society: including contact information (telephone numbers / hotline information etc.) or information from other health care and service providers.



Remember: older people are at higher risk of effects of COVID-19 but there are also a lot of differences, and we should be careful not to generalize, but analyse and adapt our programming accordingly

Definitions of “older person” vary, including people from 50 to 80 years and above. The most used age to define an ‘older person’ in the COVID-19 response is 65. Adults over 65 are a diverse group: age, gender, ethnicity, health status and a number of other factors can shape a person’s needs, risks, and ability to engage with various coping strategies during the crisis.

- **Many older people will also be very healthy and active and can support your National Society with designing and implementing activities for older people and other groups. This may include providing peer support to other older people.**
- **Physical distancing restrictions will likely mean this consultation and support has to happen remotely, to not put older people at risk of infection.**

Guidance

Why are older people more vulnerable to COVID-19?

There are both physical and social reasons. Older people do often not have as strong an immune system, which can make them more vulnerable to infectious disease. They are also more likely to have pre-existing conditions such as heart disease, lung disease, diabetes, or kidney disease, weakening their body’s ability to fight infectious disease.

Also, older people may live with family members in a crowded space or are more likely to be living in institutional settings like nursing or retirement homes (see guidance for Care Homes from HelpAge international) where there is a greater risk of infection. If older people are already isolated or experience mobility challenges, they may not be able to get the information about what to do or how to get the food or medicines they need, for example if stores are out of stock. In many societies, older people are also more likely to live in poverty, which makes it more difficult for them to get the things they need and to take care of themselves.

- Evidence for COVID-19 shows that older people are a highly vulnerable group who can get much sicker when infected by the virus and are much more likely to die.
- Some older people, especially those in quarantine with cognitive decline or dementia, may become more particularly anxious, angry, stressed, withdrawn or overly suspicious This may mean that they do not act as you would expect.
- Older people in assisted-living facilities or other circumstances might live close to each other and physical distancing can be difficult.
- They may not always have access to health services, or services provided may not be adequate for older people.
- They may have difficulty caring for themselves and depend on family or caregivers. This can become more challenging in emergencies
- They may not understand the information/messages provided or be unable to follow the instructions
- They may be less likely to utilize common communication platforms (e.g. social media)
- They may be more exposed to financial exploitation or abuse and other criminal activity (e.g. scams, theft).
- Older persons can be exposed to food insecurity, especially those who are quarantined, isolated and without safety nets and with limited funds to access the market.

- Older people are also more likely to experience mobility issues, which in settings such as refugee or IDP camps, means they may be less able to walk to communal sites in order to access information and services.

Recommended actions

1. Engage

- Find ways to get input and suggestions from older people to engage them in the planning and implementation of the most appropriate response for older people in your National Society.
- Actively engage with older people to avoid social isolation. Provide opportunities for older people to support their community, to volunteer or provide peer support. For example, older people who are already Red Cross Red Crescent volunteers could engage in remote volunteering (e.g. providing psycho-social support by phone).
- Encourage friends and family outside of their household to telephone, write notes or send cards to lift their loved one's spirits
- Develop virtual intergenerational programming to increase socialization and connection
- Collect the feedback from the people to make sure that information provided is addressing their needs
- Encourage activities like handicraft, storytelling or writing to facilitate intergenerational approaches
- Link to older person's groups or other relevant groups/people working with older people in the community: Community groups, association or service providers can help to identify the people who are most at risk, find out what support they need, including accessing basic supplies such as food and medicines. Accordingly, put in place plans for how to reach those at need with support and information

2. Communicate

Some older people might face challenges in understanding messages received from media or other sources. They might have questions about the meaning of specific terminology or words related to COVID-19. An example can be the difference between physical distancing, quarantine, and isolation. Be ready to explain using simple words. In the resources, you can find additional information, tools, and visuals ready-made to help you with that. You can also create your own pocket vocabulary, using both text and visuals so older people can keep it with them (especially in the case of older people with mental health issues, like dementia).

Older people may have physical impairments with vision or hearing or cognitive impairments which may require different ways of communicating. Be creative and look at appropriate and adapted ways of communication, like:

- Using visual or other ways (see resources) to support the messages. Messages need to be communicated in a concise, respectful and patient manner. People might ask several questions while interacting with them. You might not be able to have an answer to all of them.
- Sharing simple facts about what is going on and giving clear information about what they can do themselves, for example how to reduce the risk of infection, in words older people with/without cognitive impairment can understand. Make sure to base this information on trusted sources and not to spread rumors. Repeat the information whenever necessary.
- Use communication channels that are well understood and known by the people. This includes traditional channels like television, radio or written information materials (e.g. flyers) but consider also working with others e.g. their peers (other older people), caretakers, family members or religious and community leaders

to disseminate information. The more the people trust the source of information the more likely they are to follow the advice.

- Adapt the key messages according to the context if needed. Make sure that the messages you are selecting to use are suitable and culturally acceptable – for example in certain circumstances physical distancing might not be possible. Refer also to trustable resources if you want to change the messages and adapt them. Make sure that information provided is always verified and updated

3. Establish regular check-ins

- If you have the opportunity, ask people how they are doing and if they need help
- Consider a buddy scheme of neighbors, family members, RCRC volunteers, older people, or people from other (local) organisations. Encourage group members to form small groups or pairs and agree a schedule to phone each other. This is a good way to keep in touch and make sure people are well. This can also work in communities that do not have existing groups.
- Offer to pair up with a neighbor or community member and suggest a schedule to phone each other and keep in touch.
- Support older people to use video chat with others using smartphones, laptops, or tablets.

4. Observe

- While delivering grocery or medicines, be aware of unusual conditions. by observing around, check that everything is in order and there is no sign of problems (like dirtiness, darkness in the house, etc.) You can do this while standing at the door to be able to maintain the right distance. Remember that it is also OK to say hello and stop for a quick chat. If you see people happy to exchange a few words still maintain physical distancing.
- Be attentive to any potential signs of violence, abuse, or neglect at home. If you, or other staff or volunteers, are trained in recognizing warning signs and supporting survivors you can use this knowledge and expertise to address risks of violence. **If you do not have this training**, but you have some concern that you suspect there may be an issue with violence or abuse in the home, raise your concern with your supervisors who can then seek out advice from specialized services on the best course of action to take.

Self-Care for staff and volunteers when supporting older people

- Make sure to follow the measures to protect yourself and those you are supporting, like handwashing and physical distancing, in accordance with the guidelines provided by your National Society. If you are unsure about those ask and clarify before engaging in the activities. For additional information you can also visit the [IFRC go platform](#).
- Supporting other people is an important activity but to enable you to do this well it is essential to look after your own health and wellbeing. If feeling stressed, worried or unwell make sure to talk about this with people you trust (like other volunteers) and talk to your supervisor. You can also find additional guidance in the resource list.
- Create a buddy system with your peers to check on each other and ask about how was your day. It is important to keep this call daily to mitigate stress and to avoid burn-out.

KEY MESSAGES FOR NATIONAL SOCIETIES TO ADAPT AND USE

BEFORE USING THESE KEY MESSAGES:

- **These key messages aimed at older people have been developed by IFRC following request and consultation from National Societies in Europe.**
- **They are intended to be used as the basis for communications from National Societies.**
- **Please adapt and adjust the yellow highlighted section before using this note.**
 - **!!!!DELETE ALL YELLOW HIGHLIGHTED TEXT!!!!**

Key messages for older people during COVID 19 pandemic

In this document you can find recommendations for older people about COVID-19. It gives basic information about what older people can do to reduce the risk of getting infected with the Coronavirus and what they can do if they need help and support.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent Society / branch of [FILL IN NAME OF BRANCH/NS] is working in the community to support people who have concerns about Covid-19. You can contact them on [FILL in CONTACT INFORMATION]

People of all ages can become sick with COVID–19. People older than 65, and people who already have other illnesses (e.g. diabetes, heart problems, or cancer, respiratory diseases, people with low immunity) are more likely to get more seriously sick with COVID-19.

What is COVID-19 and how can it spread?

- COVID-19 is a disease caused by a new type of “coronavirus” that appeared in December 2019.
- People who catch the virus commonly have a fever, ongoing dry cough and a shortness of breath. Some people have other symptoms like a nasal congestion, aching muscles and a sore throat.
- Some people with the virus do not show any symptoms – but may still be contagious.
- There is currently no available treatment or vaccine for COVID-19. However, many of the symptoms can be treated.
- Most people recover well from COVID-19 without needing special treatment.
- COVID-19 can spread from person to person through droplets produced when the infected person coughs or sneezes. It can also spread when a person touches a surface or object that has the virus on it and then touches their eyes, nose or mouth.

I am feeling concerned and worried. What can I do?

Understandably, changes to your daily routine such as not being able to go out as much and limiting contact with friends, family and neighbors, can make you feel sad, stressed, worried or angry and

could also affect your sleep. It is important to recognize that these are entirely normal reactions – this is a stressful time for everyone. Some things which could help are:

- Stay in touch regularly with people you trust - family, friends, neighbors and volunteers or contact your local Red Cross Red Crescent. Sharing a chat with a friendly voice can be very helpful.
- Spend time doing the things you enjoy, like reading, cooking, watching tv, doing jigsaws, listening to your favorite radio program or other indoor hobbies.
- Look for exercises you can do at home to stay active like moving around in your home, doing some work, standing up, stretching or simple exercises that you can comfortably do. Do not push yourself to do more than you like. Go slowly. If it hurts–STOP.
- Let fresh air in through the windows. If you can, spend time on your balcony or in your garden
- Get information from trusted sources like your health care provider, the government, your local Red Cross/Red Crescent or the World Health Organisation. Avoid listening to or spreading information that does not come from trusted sources
- If you would like help, contact your local Red Cross/Red Crescent or other community organizations. Remember you don't have to cope alone, there are people who can support you!
- If possible, prepare a separate room or space in your home, in case you or others who live with you may show symptoms of COVID-19 and you need to self-isolate.
- Ask family, friends, neighbors or **your local Red Cross / Red Crescent branch ONLY INCLUDE IF THIS SERVICE IS PROVIDED** if you need support getting groceries or medical supplies.

What does “physical distancing” mean? What should I do?

- “Physical distancing” (sometimes called “social distancing”) means limiting physical contact with other people and keeping a safe space (about two arm’s lengths) between yourself and other people outside of your home. Avoid shaking hands or hugging people not living with you. Try to find other ways to greet like nodding, waving or smiling.
- This might involve having to change your daily routine. Making these changes could be challenging but are important to help protect yourself and others by slowing the spread of COVID-19.
- At the moment physical distancing is the best defense we have against the spread of the Corona virus infection and adopting these measures can and will help save lives.

Do	Don't
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do remain at home as much as possible and only go out if you have to, following the government advice. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't attend gatherings of family and friends, such as parties, community events, weddings, religious services or visit community spaces such as parks and beaches or any crowded place. <p>We know this is difficult, but gatherings of people are key times when the COVID 19 is spread.</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do limit physical contact with anyone not living with you or taking direct care of you. • If you must go out for essential purposes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ limit outings to early mornings or evenings when there are fewer people around. ○ Keep a distance of at least 2 arm lengths between yourself and other people. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't go out for leisure or travel. Limit going out for groceries as much as possible if someone can shop for you.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do arrange for food or medicine to be delivered- ask families, friends or carers for support. [ADD your local Red Cross / Red Crescent branch ONLY INCLUDE IF THIS SERVICE IS PROVIDED] can help you with that. Make sure that deliveries are left at the door to minimize contact. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't go directly to the doctor or hospital if you have COVID-19 symptoms but call before you go and describe your symptoms. Your health-care provider will tell you what to do next.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do stay in touch with neighbours, friends, family and carers using the phone, internet, or social media. Ask for support if you would like help to use these. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't ask friends, family or carers to visit you, especially if they have symptoms of COVID-19
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do keep yourself entertained and informed in your usual way – reading, listening to the radio, watching TV etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't listen and read news updates about COVID-19 all day long – this can become overwhelming.

[IMPORTANT INFORMATION BEFORE USING THIS NOTE]

Please include the next paragraph **only** if your branch / HQ can directly provide support in this area, or can provide referrals to reliable support for older people experiencing violence, abuse or neglect

- During this very unusual time, people may experience increased tension, violence, abuse and neglect. If you're worried that you or someone you live with may be experiencing violence or abuse, call a trusted person and ask for help. Your [ADD your local Red Cross / Red Crescent branch] can support you or the police. **[IMPORTANT: NS ADAPT THIS TEXT FOR YOUR SITUATION – put hotline/police/RCRC numbers as appropriate]**

How can I manage my health?

- If you have any existing health conditions continue taking the medications and following instructions you have been given by your health care provider, even if you have new symptoms related to COVID-19. If having doubts or concerns, contact your health care provider. Be aware: new procedures may be in place to handle increased demand.

- Follow the instructions of public authorities. If in doubt, ask your health care provider for advice. Frequently wash your hands thoroughly for a minimum of 20 seconds with soap and water. Use an alcohol-based sanitizer if soap and water are not available.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth as much as possible.
- Cover your mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or sneezing, and immediately throw away the tissue. Cough into your elbow if a tissue is not available and wash your hands afterwards
- Clean and disinfect frequently touched objects and surfaces.
- To support your immune system, try to eat healthily, maintain regular exercise and avoid smoking and excess alcohol.
- Prepare an up-to-date list of emergency contacts including your family members, medical doctor and others who would need to be contacted in an emergency or if you were taken ill.
- Refill any prescription medication you need to ensure you have enough for at least 30 days if possible
- If you're feeling sad, stressed or worried, try the tips given above.

I am feeling sick and suspect that I have COVID-19, what should I do?

- Stay at home
- Do not panic or hide your condition. Contact your health care provider by telephone or online services if you have:
 - A fever
 - Dry cough
 - Blocked nose
 - General weakness and tiredness
 - Been in contact with someone who you know has COVID-19
- Describe your symptoms to your health care provider. This will help them take care of you and keep other people safe. Also inform the health care provider about any medications you are already taking.
- Seek immediate medical attention reason if your symptoms get worse and you have any of the emergency warning signs, including:
 - Difficulty breathing or shortness of breath
 - Persistent pain or pressure in the chest
 - Confusion

Information in this guidance is based on advice from the World Health Organisation on COVID-19 as well as guidance and advice from HelpAge International

Further information is available at:

https://www.who.int/health-topics/coronavirus#tab=tab_1

<https://www.helpage.org/what-we-do/covid19-guidance-and-advice-for-older-people>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES TO SUPPORT WORK WITH OLDER PEOPLE

Links to other guidelines and tools




1. Visual messages in English and other languages

- IFRC:
 - IFRC visual messages for download <https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/emergency/global-covid-19/> (scroll down the page) – [Links to editable versions accessible here](#)
- HelpAge international:
 - [Advice for older people in accessible format](#) (editable version)
 - [Advice for older people](#) (editable version)
- GP-Older-COVID: <https://www.corona-older.com/post/how-to-survive-the-lockdown>
- BBC: <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-51711227>

2. Tools and Guidelines

- **Guidance and advice for communities and older people's associations** (HelpAge international)
 - <https://www.helpage.org/what-we-do/covid19-guidance-and-advice-for-communities-and-older-peoples-associations/>
- **Guidelines for care homes for older people in the context of COVID-19**
 - HelpAge: <https://www.helpage.org/what-we-do/guidelines-for-care-homes-for-older-people-in-the-context-of-coronavirus-covid19/>
 - Detailed technical guidance from WHO: https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331508/WHO-2019-nCoV-IPC_long_term_care-2020.1-eng.pdf
- **Psychological coping during disease outbreak – Elderly and People with Chronic Conditions** (Hong Kong Red Cross)
 - https://pscentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/MHPSS-during-disease-outbreak_elderly_ENG.pdf
- **IASC guidance: Mental Health and Psychosocial Aspects of COVID-19 Outbreak**
 - <https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/iasc-reference-group-mental-health-and-psychosocial-support-emergency-settings/interim-briefing>
- **Psychosocial support for Volunteers:**
 - https://pscentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/MHPSS-in-nCoV-2020_ENG-1.pdf
- **Remote Psychological First Aid during the COVID-19 outbreak Interim guidance:**
 - <https://pscentre.org/archives/9119>
- **Healthy Ageing tools and materials:**
 - <https://fednet.ifrc.org/en/resources/health/healthy-ageing/>

Example pocket vocabulary

<p>Physical distancing</p>	<p>Also being referred to as 'social distancing' this is about trying to maintain some physical distance from other people to reduce rates of infection. Ways of doing this include avoiding crowded places and big groups of people; public transport; physical contact with others, including greetings like shaking hands or hugging; and school and business closures.</p>	
<p>Self-isolation:</p>	<p>Isolation separates sick people with a contagious disease from people who are not sick.¹</p> <p>Self-isolation is a measure designed for anyone with symptoms of the coronavirus or who is confirmed to have the coronavirus. It means staying at home in one room and not leaving your home for any reason.</p>	 <p>If unwell, isolate yourself and your family</p>
<p>Self-Quarantine:</p>	<p>Quarantine separates and restricts the movement of people who were exposed to a contagious disease to see if they become sick.</p> <p>A person may have been exposed to the virus without knowing it. Someone in self-quarantine stays separated from others, and they limit movement outside of their home or current place. Quarantine helps limit further spread of COVID-19.</p>	 <p>Don't visit other people's houses or socialise outside your home</p>
	<p><i>Add here additional terms and precise definitions used in your country</i></p>	

¹ Physical distancing, Self-isolation and self-quarantine definitions taken or adapted from Centre for disease control: <https://www.cdc.gov/quarantine/index.html> and <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/social-distancing.html>