

Infection prevention and control fact sheet for disability support workers

Disclaimers:

- *This fact sheet contains national guidance on a number of topics relating to infection prevention and control.*
- *It is not a substitute for state and territory public health guidance, which may provide more detail or differ from the guidance contained in this document.*
- *Where guidance differs, you should follow your state and territory public health guidance.*
- *The information in this factsheet is current as at **23 March 2022**.*

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1. Introduction

Some people with disability will be at [greater risk from COVID-19](#) because they:

- have different physical conditions, including chronic conditions and weakened immune systems
- have difficulties physically distancing from others – especially those who rely on support and assistance from their family, carers and support workers
- may be unable to safely implement hygiene measures independently (e.g., wearing a mask or hand washing), and/or
- live in higher risk accommodation, such as a group home or larger congregate setting.

As a disability support worker, you play a vital role in keeping your clients COVID safe and supporting them if they contract COVID-19.

This fact sheet provides information on how you can:

- protect yourself from COVID-19
- protect your clients from COVID-19, and
- support your clients if they catch COVID-19.

This fact sheet was developed by the Australian Government Department of Health, and it contains national guidance. It is not a substitute for state and territory public health guidance, which may provide more detail or differ from advice contained in this document. Where guidance differs, you should follow the guidance issued by your state or territory. Website links to state and territory resources are listed at the end of this fact sheet.

2. Preventing the spread of COVID-19

2.a. Overview

There are many things you can do to keep yourself and those you support safe from COVID-19, including the [Omicron variant](#). These include:

- getting vaccinated against COVID-19, including getting your booster shot
- getting tested if you develop symptoms, or if you are a close contact of someone with COVID-19
- staying home if you are unwell
- avoiding contact with others who have symptoms
- physical distancing, where possible
- covering your mouth and nose when coughing or sneezing
- wearing a close-fitting face mask or respirator (N95/P2) where there is increased risk of/from transmission
- increasing indoor air flow
- practising good hand hygiene (washing your hands thoroughly and regularly)
- routine, regular cleaning of surfaces in shared spaces, and
- staying up to date with local public health guidance.

2.b. COVID-19 Vaccination

2.b.i. COVID-19 vaccination and booster doses for disability support workers

Getting vaccinated will lower your risk of getting or spreading COVID-19. Being up to date with your vaccinations also provides good protection against serious illness from COVID-19.

Two doses of COVID-19 vaccination will provide most people with good protection, especially against severe disease. A booster dose will provide you with better protection against the Omicron variant, the main type of COVID-19 in the community at present.

ATAGI has released [recommendations](#) on how many COVID-19 vaccinations people need to receive to be considered up to date. People aged 16 years and older are currently considered up to date if they have received a primary course (two doses) of vaccinations plus their booster dose.

Further advice from ATAGI on vaccination is available on the [Department of Health's website](#).

This advice includes:

- Advice on the definition of 'fully vaccinated' and 'up to date'
- Guidance on medical exemptions for COVID-19 vaccines
- Information on vaccination consent

The website also contains [resources](#) for disability support workers and providers.

All states and territories have mandated COVID-19 vaccination for disability support workers through public health orders. These requirements differ across states and territories. You should also monitor your state or territory health website for the most up to date information and local guidance.

For information on COVID-19 vaccination for disability support workers, you can visit the [Department of Health website](#).

2.b.ii. COVID-19 vaccination for people with disability

Vaccination within Australia is not mandatory and remains a choice. Informed consent by the person (or their person responsible or guardian) is required prior to receiving a vaccination.

However, there are a number of ways you can support people with disability to access COVID-19 vaccination. These may include supporting clients:

- to access information about COVID-19 vaccination (see [resources for people with disability](#))
- to book their COVID-19 vaccination appointments
- to access vaccination appointments, and
- during and after COVID-19 vaccination.

If your client needs assistance booking a COVID-19 vaccination or booster, they can call the Disability Gateway on 1800 643 787 for information or help with booking an appointment. You can also call on their behalf if they ask you to.

More information about COVID-19 vaccines for people with disability can be found on the [Department of Health website](#).

2.c. Using Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

*2.c.i. Using PPE when supporting clients **who are** suspected or confirmed to be COVID-19 positive*

You should wear appropriate PPE (P2/N95 respirator, gown, mask, protective eyewear and gloves) when providing support to a client who has or is suspected of having COVID-19. Disability support workers should check and adhere to state and territory requirements on the use of PPE.

Advice on how disability support workers should use PPE can be found [here](#). PPE should be used in addition to other hygiene and infection control measures.

2.c.ii. Use of PPE when supporting clients who are not suspected to be COVID-19 positive

States and territories currently require disability support workers to wear masks when providing support to people with disability. Even with recent relaxation of mask requirements, jurisdictions still require masks in care settings and/or when in contact with vulnerable people.

You may choose to use a P2/N95 respirator when supporting a person, even if they are not COVID-19 positive, or suspected to be. The decision to wear a P2/N95 respirator should be based upon a risk assessment that considers factors such as:

- the support setting
- the nature of support being provided
- levels of community transmission, and
- the vulnerability of the person receiving support or care.
 - Vulnerability can be due to age, level of disability, or other medical conditions.

Your risk assessment should also consider local state or territory guidance.

If you choose to wear a P2/N95 respirator, training and fit testing should be completed for correct and effective use. PPE that is well fitted, well tolerated, risk assessed and compliant with use provides protection. A video that demonstrates use of PPE can be found [here](#).

Advice on how PPE should be used, and how it can be accessed, can be found [here](#).

2.c.iii. Accessing PPE

PPE can be purchased through the private market, for example from supermarkets, pharmacies or online from select suppliers. As a disability support worker, you should be able to access PPE through your employer.

2.d. Improving indoor air flow

COVID-19 is more easily spread indoors. This is because there is often less space to physically distance, and the air flow isn't as good as outside. Particles of COVID-19 move away more quickly in the open air and spaces with good air flow compared to spaces with less air flow.

You may be able to support:

- clients to implement measures to improve indoor ventilation in their home, or
- providers to implement measures to improve indoor ventilation in disability residential services.

Indoor air flow can be improved by making sure that:

- windows or doors are open to maximise air flow (if weather and situation permit)
- air conditioning systems are well-maintained and operating properly
- exhaust fans are working well
- the distance between people is increased when indoors, where possible
- the number of people in an indoor space at any one time is reduced where possible, and
- time is spent outdoors whenever possible and the length of time that people spend indoors together is reduced.

3. Helping your client to plan for COVID-19

As COVID-19 is currently widespread in the community, it's a good idea for people with disability to plan ahead in case they contract COVID-19 or they need to isolate. You may be able to support your clients to undertake the following planning activities.

3.a. Your clients should have a plan for managing COVID-19 at home

It is a good idea for your clients to plan for how they would manage COVID-19 at home, in case they catch it. This can include:

- a list of people they should tell that they have tested positive, such as their:
 - family and close friends
 - support workers and support providers
 - workplace
 - state or territory, if they are required to report the test result, and
 - anyone who they have spent time with from the 2 days before they started having symptoms or tested positive — whichever came first.¹
- a list of phone numbers to call if they need help, such as their:
 - doctor
 - family
 - friends, and
 - over-the-phone support and information services including:
 - National Coronavirus Helpline 1800 020 080
 - Lifeline 13 11 14
 - Beyond Blue 1800 512 348
 - Kids Helpline 1800 551 800
 - National Disability Insurance Scheme enquiries 1800 800 110
 - Disability Information Helpline 1800 643 787
- how they will get food, water, medication and other essentials whilst staying at home
- if they self-manage their NDIS supports and engage their own providers or workers, planning for contingencies in the event of usual workers being unavailable due to illness or needing to isolate
- who can look after their children, pets, or people in their care if they have to go to hospital, and
- stay-at-home activities to keep entertained.

Other resources that are available:

- The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners has published [a guide, action plan and symptom diary to help COVID-19 positive patients](#) to help them manage their symptoms at home in collaboration with their general practice. This can help health professionals to understand the progression of a person's illness.
- Collaboration4inclusion have developed the [Person-centred Emergency Preparedness Plan for COVID-19 for people with disability](#), which can help your clients plan ahead.

¹ <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/managing-covid-19/just-diagnosed-with-covid-19#:~:text=You%20should%20also%20tell%20anyone,state%20or%20territory%20Health%20Department.>

3.b. COVID-19 at home care kits

It is a good idea for people with disability to have the following items available in their homes, in case they get sick:

- **Thermometer:** used to measure body temperature. A [fever](#), which can be a symptom of COVID-19, is a temperature of 38°C or higher.
- **Pain-relief medicine:** [paracetamol](#) or [ibuprofen](#) can help relieve symptoms of a fever.
- **Their usual medications:** your client should have at least a week's supply of any [medicines](#) they take regularly, including prescription medicines.
- **Treatment for dehydration:** some people with COVID-19 may experience [vomiting](#) or [diarrhoea](#), which can lead to [dehydration](#). Drinking water is the best way to treat mild dehydration. However, oral hydration solutions can also help. These are available over the counter at pharmacies.
- **Disposable surgical masks:** COVID-19 is more likely to spread within a household than in many other places. If your client is isolating in a home and needs to use a shared room, everyone using that space should wear a [mask](#) (unless they are unable to tolerate one due to a medical condition or disability).
- **Hand sanitiser and soap:** good [handwashing](#) helps prevent the spread of viruses. Your client's household should have enough liquid soap to get them, or any people they live with, through isolation.
- **Cleaning products and disposable gloves:** COVID-19 can survive on surfaces for up to a few days. Your client's household should have plenty of household detergents and disinfectant. Disposable gloves should also be available for use when cleaning. Gloves should be disposed after use and hands should be washed.
- **Other essential products for daily life:** for example, any usual feeding or continence products

More information on [kits to manage COVID-19 at home can be found here](#).

A healthcare provider may advise your client about other things they can do to be prepared. For example, if the client is at a higher risk of complications from COVID-19, their healthcare provider may consider giving them a **pulse oximeter** so that you can monitor their blood oxygen level.

Depending on your client's location, their state or territory health department may be able to provide some of the items listed above if they get COVID-19.

3.c. Keeping healthcare details up to date and on hand

Your client should have a record of current health conditions and medications that is up to date and accessible.

The [COVID-19 Companion](#) can help you convey important personal information to health professionals if your client needs to go to hospital.

4. Testing and isolation for disability support workers

4.a. When to test for COVID-19

You should take a rapid antigen test (RAT) or PCR test if you:

- have [COVID-19 symptoms](#)
- are a close contact² of someone who has tested positive
- have been advised to do so by a health professional, or
- when providing support to people with disability in disability residential support settings and in private homes (see further information below).

The [Australia Health Protection Principal Committee](#) has issued recommendations on regular testing. This advice is subject to community prevalence of COVID-19 and the availability of RATs. You should also follow any health directions of your state or territory. Further information can be found on their [websites](#).

In disability residential support settings³ that are in areas with high community spread of COVID-19, it is recommended:

- workers undertake a daily RAT (at least twice weekly when there are supply issues), and
- visitors undertake a RAT for each day they visit.

For private homes that are located in areas with high community spread of COVID-19, it is recommended:

- disability support workers undertake a daily RAT (at least twice weekly when there are supply issues).

4.b. What to do if you test positive

The following information reflects national guidance and may vary from local guidance in your state or territory. It is important that you follow guidance for your state and territory if you test positive, as this may include different requirements.

If **you** return a positive COVID-19 test take the following steps:

1. [Isolate](#) at home for 7 days (minimum) from the day you had your test, away from other people in your household.
2. Notify your clients and employer that you have tested positive for COVID-19. Provide your employer with any information they will need to ensure continuity of support is provided to your clients.
3. If you have symptoms at Day 6, you must stay at home until your symptoms are gone.
4. If you have no symptoms at Day 7, you can return to normal living and leave your home. You do not need a further test. If you still have symptoms, you must stay at home until your symptoms clear up.

² You are a 'close contact' if you are living with someone who has COVID-19 or have spent 4 hours or longer with someone in a home or healthcare setting since they developed COVID-19.² You can catch COVID-19 if you spend less than four hours with a person, though the risk of catching COVID increases the longer you spend with someone who is positive. If you are using appropriate PPE, you will not be considered a close contact.

³ A disability residential support setting refers to any public or private service providing accommodation and disability support services to two or more people with disability. This includes: disability accommodation provided under the NDIS, group homes provided outside of the NDIS, supported residential services (SRS), assisted boarding houses, and other similar accommodation settings in Australia ³

5. Wear a mask when leaving the home and avoid visiting high-risk settings for at least 7 days following the end of symptoms.

If you **test positive** for COVID-19 with a **PCR** test, you will be contacted by your state or territory health department.

If you **test positive** for COVID-19 with a **RAT**, you should register this test with your state or territory health department as required. After you have registered your result, your state or territory health department can provide you additional advice and support.

4.c. Isolating if you have COVID-19 you are a close contact

4.c.i. General guidance on isolating

The following advice reflects national guidance for the general public on isolating if you are a close contact of someone with COVID-19. There are some exceptions to this advice which are outlined in section 4.c.ii (below).

If you are a close contact,⁴ you should stay at home and isolate from others for 7 days after you last had contact with a person who has COVID-19. For example, if you had contact with someone at midday on a Monday, you should stay at home until midday on the following Monday. If your Day 6 test is negative, you can leave home and return to normal living after completing the 7 days of home isolation if you tested negative and don't have COVID-19 symptoms.⁵

While not compulsory, it is a good idea to stay at home until you no longer have symptoms, even if you have a negative RAT result.⁶

For more information on isolation periods see the [COVID-19 Test and Isolate National Protocols](#).

4.c.ii. Special testing and isolation arrangements for essential workers (including disability support workers)

COVID-19 isolation requirements have caused staff shortages across many essential industries. Because of this, arrangements have been introduced to enable some essential workers (including disability support workers) who are close contacts to return to work if:

- they do not have COVID-19 symptoms, and
- steps can be taken to minimise the risk of COVID-19 transmission.

These arrangements differ across states and territories. Your employer should advise you of any changes to the testing and isolation requirements for disability support workers within your state or territory.

Return to work in these circumstances is optional for workers.

⁴ You are a 'close contact' if you are living with someone who has COVID-19, or have spent 4 hours or longer with someone in a home or healthcare setting since they developed COVID-19. You are not a close contact if you have been providing support to a COVID-19 positive patient whilst using appropriate PPE. You can catch COVID-19 if you spend less than four hours with a person, though the risk of catching COVID increases the longer you spend with someone who is positive.

⁵ WA, SA, NT & TAS residents should check their state or territory requirements and timelines.

⁶ This advice is based on the [Public Health Laboratory Network – Communicable Diseases Network Australia joint statement on SARS-CoV-2 Rapid Antigen Tests](#) and further information on the use and interpretation of RAT tests can be found in this document.

5. Supporting a client who has tested positive

5.a. Using PPE

When providing support for people who have (or are suspected of having) COVID-19, you should use P2/N95 respirators, a gown, protective eyewear, and gloves. Further advice on how you should use PPE can be found [here](#). PPE is not a substitute for other hygiene and infection control measures.

If a client needs to isolate due to testing positive or being a close contact, they are still able to access essential disability support services. You should encourage your clients to contact you, or your employer, as early as possible to tell you or your employer about their COVID-19 positive result.

5.b. When to seek medical help for your client and helping your client to manage COVID-19 symptoms

You should contact the client's usual GP when a positive test is made so they are aware of the situation and if you are concerned about the client's well-being.

5.b.i. When your client should get help from their GP

Your client should receive help from their GP if they:

- are experiencing difficulty eating or drinking or going to the toilet, or
- can't take their regular medication.

5.b.ii. When to seek help from emergency services

- If your client develops severe symptoms such as severe shortness of breath or chest pain, call triple zero (000) immediately and tell both the call handler and the paramedics on arrival that your client has COVID-19.
- If you feel unsure about seeking medical assistance, you can:
 - use healthdirect's [COVID-19 Symptom Checker](#),
 - or call the National Coronavirus Helpline 24/7 on 1800 020 080.

5.b.iii. Managing COVID-19 symptoms

You can use healthdirect's [COVID-19 Symptom Checker](#) to get more information about symptoms your client is experiencing and how they should be managed.

6. COVID-19 resources for disability support workers

General information

- [COVID-19 disease, symptoms and variants | Australian Government Department of Health](#)
- [COVID-19 Omicron variant | Australian Government Department of Health](#)
- [COVID-19 symptoms and when to seek help | healthdirect](#)
- [People with disability and COVID-19 | healthdirect](#)
- [COVID-19 advice for people with disability | Australian Government Department of Health](#)

Providing support during the COVID-19 pandemic

- [Providing disability support services during COVID-19](#)
- [Personal protective equipment \(PPE\) for the health workforce during COVID-19](#)
- [COVID-19 infection control training](#)
- [Hygiene and cleaning](#)
- [Improving ventilation in indoor workplaces: COVID-19](#)

COVID-19 vaccines

- [Information for disability workers about COVID-19 vaccines | Australian Government Department of Health](#)
- [Information for people with disability about COVID-19 vaccines | Australian Government Department of Health](#)
- [Accessible state and territory clinics](#)
- [Vaccine Clinic Finder](#)

Key contacts

- [National Coronavirus Helpline](#) - 1800 020 080
- [Disability Gateway](#) - 1800 643 787
- [Safe Work Australia](#) for concerns about workplace safety
 - info@swa.gov.au (include your state or territory when emailing Safe Work Australia)

State and territory resources

- ACT <https://www.covid19.act.gov.au/home>
[COVID-19 and Disability Support Services](#)
- SA <https://www.covid-19.sa.gov.au/>
- NSW <https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19>
- QLD <https://www.covid19.qld.gov.au/>
[COVID-19 Information for people with disability and carers](#)
- VIC <https://www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au/>

- WA <https://www.wa.gov.au/government/covid-19-coronavirus>
- NT <https://coronavirus.nt.gov.au/>
- TAS [https://www.coronavirus.tas.gov.au/Disability Support Workers | Coronavirus disease \(COVID-19\)](https://www.coronavirus.tas.gov.au/Disability%20Support%20Workers%20|%20Coronavirus%20disease%20(COVID-19))

7. COVID-19 resources for people with disability

General information

- [COVID-19 disease, symptoms and variants | Australian Government Department of Health](#)
- [COVID-19 Omicron variant | Australian Government Department of Health](#)
- [COVID-19 symptoms and when to seek help | healthdirect](#)
- [People with disability and COVID-19 | healthdirect](#)
- [COVID-19 advice for people with disability | Australian Government Department of Health](#)
- [COVID-19 Easy Read resources](#)

Key contacts

- [Disability Gateway](#) - 1800 643 787
- [National Coronavirus Helpline](#) - 1800 020 080
- [healthdirect \(for health advice\)](#) - 1800 022 222
- [National Relay Service](#)

COVID-19 vaccines

- [Information for people with disability about COVID-19 vaccines | Australian Government Department of Health](#)
- [Accessible state and territory clinics](#)
- [Vaccine Clinic Finder](#)
- [Additional clinical considerations for COVID-19 vaccination | Australian Government Department of Health](#)
- [COVID-19 vaccination videos – Auslan](#)
- [COVID-19 Easy Read resources](#)

Planning ahead

- [A guide, action plan and symptom diary to help COVID-19 positive patients](#)
- [Person-centred Emergency Preparedness Plan for COVID-19 for people with disability](#)