

COVID-19 Stakeholder Kit

for 2024

Supporting people with disability

updated April 2024

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Overview

This stakeholder kit provides information and resources for organisations delivering services to people with disability. It recognises that some people with disability have a higher risk of severe outcomes from COVID-19, including people with underlying health conditions, communication or access barriers, and those living in shared residential accommodation.

The kit aims to assist organisations to communicate the importance of preventative behaviours in reducing the risks posed by COVID-19 through provision of shareable information, including links to videos and factsheets. It also provides factual information providing the rationale for why this communication remains critical.

Key Messages

Top lines

- COVID-19 is still around and is a threat to some people with disability.
- Some people with disability have health conditions or other factors that put them at greater risk of experiencing severe illness including death from COVID-19.
- Vaccination combined with COVID-safe behaviours are the most effective tools in keeping people safe from serious illness.

Further information

- Find out more information on COVID-19 vaccines and eligibility by visiting <http://www.health.gov.au> or talking to your healthcare provider.
- The Department of Health and Aged Care has also launched a new online tool to help people work out if and when they are eligible for a COVID-19 vaccination in 2024. This tool does not replace advice from health professionals and people should still speak with their health professional regarding their COVID-19 vaccinations. [COVID-19 booster eligibility checker | Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care](#)
- Assistance booking a vaccine is available for people with disability and their families, friends and providers through the Disability Gateway.
 - You can call on 1800 643 787 between the hours of 8am to 8pm, Monday to Friday.
- Some vaccination services can visit you in your home if you cannot travel to the service.
- The [flu and COVID-19 vaccine](#) can be given on the same day.

Current advice - overview

- In 2024, all adults can consider one or two COVID-19 doses depending on age and health status. People are encouraged to seek vaccination advice from their healthcare providers, specific to their circumstances.
- A primary course of vaccination against COVID-19 for people aged 5 years or older, and a booster dose for those eligible are still recommended.

- Life-saving oral antiviral treatments are available for people at risk of severe illness from COVID-19. You will need to speak to your GP, nurse practitioner or pharmacist about getting a prescription for oral treatments.
- It is recommended that people with disability develop their own [personal plan](#) of what to do during a COVID-19 outbreak.
- You can be COVID-safe by wearing a mask, physical distancing and practicing good hygiene.
- If you test positive for COVID-19, you should stay at home while you are sick.

Everyone's responsibility

- Australia is likely to experience further waves of COVID-19 and the emergence of new variants.
- It is important to maintain COVID-safe behaviours that help protect you and those around you from COVID-19.
- Vaccination protects people from severe complications of COVID-19.

COVID-19 vaccines

- Research shows that COVID-19 vaccinations provide good protection against severe illness and death.
- Protection provided by COVID-19 vaccines decreases over time. A booster gives additional protection against severe illness from COVID-19.
- It is easy and free to get vaccinated from your local health professional, GP, Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service, or pharmacist.
- The Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) advice on COVID vaccination is updated from time to time.
- For COVID-19 vaccination recommendations visit the [Department of Health and Aged Care website](#) or refer to the Australian Immunisation Handbook (COVID-19 | The Australian Immunisation Handbook ([health.gov.au](https://www.health.gov.au))).
- Information about COVID-19 vaccines for people with disability is available in Auslan and EasyRead [Department of Health and Aged Care website](#).
- Regular updates on vaccination and related health issues are also provided through the Department of Health and Aged Care's [Disability Provider Alerts](#).
- You can subscribe to these alerts by emailing the Department of Health and Aged Care: DisabilityCovidVaccineDelivery@Health.gov.au

Health advice

COVID-19 vaccination advice

- The Government has announced recommendations for 2024 COVID-19 vaccinations.
- In 2024, those aged over 65 years of age, and adults with severe immunocompromise, continue to be eligible to receive a COVID-19 vaccine dose every 6 months.
 - All other adults are eligible to receive a single dose this year.

- Children aged 5 to 17 who are severely immunocompromised can receive a single dose this year.
- The COVID-19 booster can be administered at the same time as the annual influenza shot.
- People are encouraged to seek vaccination advice from their healthcare providers, specific to their circumstances.

Understanding risk

Mortality rates of people with disability have decreased significantly over the course of each COVID-19 wave. Nonetheless, the mortality rate of people with disability is higher than that of the general population.

The higher mortality rate is likely due to the increased prevalence of complex underlying health conditions among people with disability, compared to the general population. It reinforces the importance for people with disability, particularly those with complex health conditions, to maintain vaccination against COVID-19.

Understanding the risk COVID-19 poses can help people make informed decisions.

COVID-19 can be dangerous for people with disability, particularly if they have:

- an existing chronic condition
- a weakened immune system
- difficulty maintaining physical distancing because of impracticality
- difficulty maintaining hygiene measures, such as wearing a face mask.

More information on groups at higher risk from COVID-19 can be found in the [COVID-19 Chapter](#) of the Australian Immunisation Handbook

ATAGI's clinical guidance on medical risk factors for severe disease is [here](#).

Immunocompromised

People who are immunocompromised are more likely to get sick and have a more severe illness from COVID-19 or be sick for a longer period. People can be immunocompromised either due to a medical condition or from taking medication that suppresses the immune system.

A shared decision making guide for people with immunocompromise can be found [here](#).

COVID-19 oral treatments

Two COVID-19 oral antiviral treatments molnupiravir (Lagevrio®) and nirmatrelvir and ritonavir (Paxlovid®) are listed on the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) for the treatment of COVID-19.

Eligible individuals who test positive to COVID-19 can access these medicines from their local community pharmacy on a prescription from a medical practitioner or an authorised nurse practitioner, in accordance with the **PBS** requirements.

Timing is critical when taking oral antiviral treatments. They are most effective when started as soon as possible, and must be started within **5 days** of symptoms starting or testing positive for COVID-19. People who are at higher risk of severe illness are encouraged to talk to their doctor or nurse practitioner **before** they get sick to

discuss if a COVID-19 treatment will be right for them and develop a COVID-19 plan to ensure they have quick access to treatment if needed.

More information about COVID-19 treatments for people with disability, including for people with swallowing difficulties, can be found in the [Information sheet for people with disability](#).

Vaccination access

How providers can support COVID-19 vaccination

The support of disability service providers, and disability support workers, is crucial in ensuring people with disability have the information they need to make an informed choice about COVID-19 vaccination.

All National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) providers have a responsibility to support NDIS participants to access timely vaccination, should the participant decide to be vaccinated.

Providers can:

- Ensure people with disability have the facts about COVID-19 and vaccination, so they can make an informed choice.
- Ask the local [Primary Health Network](#) (PHN) for help finding suitable vaccine providers, including on-site vaccinations if needed.
- Arrange an on-site visit from a COVID-19 vaccination service if you can't access any other vaccination options. Your local PHN can assist you with this.
- Support your staff to get vaccinated as well.
- Direct any questions on access to vaccination to the COVID-19 vaccine disability team at the Department of Health and Aged Care via email: DisabilityCovidVaccineDelivery@Health.gov.au
- The National Disability Insurance Agency continues to provide vaccination enabling payments to eligible providers to assist disability support workers and participants to receive vaccination.

Informed consent

Prior to vaccine administration, a person with disability (or a person who is lawfully able to make decisions on their behalf) must give informed consent, with any necessary support to do so.

Information on what to do if a substitute decision maker says no to COVID-19 vaccination is available on [the Department of Health and Aged Care website](#).

Everyone has the right to decide to be vaccinated, including people with disability.

Under the NDIS Code of Conduct, all NDIS providers and workers have an obligation to deliver supports and services in a safe manner. NDIS providers and workers also have an obligation to act with respect for individual rights to freedom of expression, self-determination, and decision-making in accordance with relevant laws and conventions.

Consent forms may assist with the administration of the consent process. The Department of Health and Aged Care has designed a sample [template](#).

Outbreak prevention, planning and management

For individuals

It is recommended that people with disability develop their own personal plan of what to do in an emergency, including during a COVID-19 infection. An emergency plan covers how a person's support needs will be managed in an emergency.

This plan should outline the steps people with disability, their providers and carers will take together in the event of a COVID-19 diagnosis to ensure they continue to receive the support they need.

Collaborating 4 Inclusion has worked with the Department of Health and Aged Care to develop a range of resources to help people with disability, and their families and carers, tailor a plan specific to their needs.

It is important that disability providers work with people with disability to establish a plan and keep it up to date.

Visit [Collaborating 4 Inclusion](#) for further information.

For providers

The Communicable Diseases Network Australia has published [National Guidelines for the Prevention, Control and Public Health Management of Outbreaks of Acute Respiratory Infection \(including COVID-19 and Influenza\) in Disability Residential Services](#). These guidelines can help providers of disability residential services apply a risk-based approach to the prevention, identification, and management of acute respiratory infection outbreaks.

The [NDIS Commission website](#) provides information and guidance to help NDIS providers to meet their obligations under the NDIS Act in relation to COVID-19 and managing outbreaks.

The [NDIS Practice Standards and Quality Indicators](#) provides further guidance for providers for meeting obligations for maintaining continuity of safe, quality supports for NDIS participants, including specific guidance for emergency and disaster management.

Protecting workers

A disability support worker's risk of exposure will depend on factors including the work setting, the number of people being provided services, and the spread of COVID-19 in the community.

Employers should have specific policies and procedures related to infectious disease, and everyone should practice everyday prevention actions when working with people with disability including observing COVID-safe behaviours. Workers are encouraged to be appropriately vaccinated against COVID-19 and use appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to reduce the rate of infection.

Workers who provide close personal disability care in high-risk settings such as disability care services, should not attend work:

- for 7 days after testing positive for COVID-19
- while they have [symptoms](#).

Workers are encouraged to wear a mask in the company of vulnerable people when returning to work after an infection.

Disability service providers and support workers must follow the rules that apply to their location. Monitor and follow advice of your local health department.

Personal Protective Equipment

PPE protects the wearer from infection and helps stop the spread of COVID-19.

The [Department of Health and Aged Care](#) has information available to help you find out who should use PPE and how to use it.

For further information on supports available through the NDIS visit the NDIA website.

COVID-safe behaviours

COVID-safe behaviours help protect you and those around you from COVID-19. You can be COVID-safe by wearing a mask, physical distancing and practicing good hand and respiratory hygiene.

At any time, you can choose to wear a mask in public areas to help protect your health.

When cases are increasing, it is recommended that everyone who can wears a mask in crowded indoor areas such as public transport, lifts, and other high traffic areas.

You should stay at home if you are feeling unwell and until your symptoms resolve.

Try and maximise your time spent in well-ventilated spaces.

More information on COVID-safe behaviours can be found at [Living with COVID-19 | Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care](#).

COVID-19 and ventilation

Good ventilation remains an important consideration for indoor disability settings.

The [Australian Health Principal Protection Committee](#) advises that increased airflow may limit the spread of COVID-19 in indoor environments, particularly in crowded, inadequately ventilated spaces where infected persons may spend time with others.

The World Health Organisation advises that the risk of COVID-19 spreading indoors may be reduced through well-designed, maintained and operational ventilation systems. Increased use of natural ventilation (such as enabling airflow through open windows) may provide the same benefits. Practical advice on how to improve indoor ventilation can be found on [the Victorian Government website](#).

Additional information can be found on the [Ventilation factsheet | Disability Gateway](#).

The National Disability Insurance Agency has a range of COVID-19 measures for NDIS participants and providers. This includes the ability for eligible participants to purchase a portable air purifier through their existing NDIS plan funding to assist in improving air quality in key living areas and help to ensure continuity of supports. For more information see [Flexible low cost AT for support continuity | NDIS](#).

COVID-19 and Mental Health

The impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, physical distancing and isolation may cause feelings of anxiousness, stress and worry.

Mental health support is available for all Australians.

The following services are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, anywhere in Australia:

- Lifeline - 13 11 14
- Beyond Blue - 1300 22 4636
- Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National) - 131 450
- Kids helpline - 1800 55 1800
- Suicide Call Back Service – 1300 659 467

You can also access tips to help mental health from the [Council for Intellectual Disability](#).

More resources are available on the [Department of Health and Aged Care's website](#)