

Protecting older people during the coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic

Covid-19 is a new disease that presents specific risks for older people.

Initial research in China based on over 44,000 cases of Covid-19, showed a mortality rate of 2.3% for the general population, rising to 8% in those aged 70-79 and nearly 15% in those 80 and over.

It has been characterised by the WHO as “a controllable pandemic” which all countries need to prepare for and respond to. This presents a challenge for low- and middle-income countries with weaker health and care systems, as well as in countries hosting populations of refugees and displaced people living in camps.

This pandemic can be suppressed but only in so far as people act in solidarity with each other and take steps to protect and care for those most at risk.

HelpAge International has six key messages for decisionmakers at global and national levels:

1. Equality and non-discrimination

Older people have the right to health including access to information, care and medical services on an equal basis with everyone else. The risk of discrimination in accessing medical services is one that should be monitored for all high-risk groups, including older people.

2. Preparedness and planning

Preparedness and planning should take account of the additional risks to older people. Countries are advised to act in line WHO’s global Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan which outlines how to implement public health measures to manage Covid-19.

3. Public information – reaching older people

Regular communications with the public and at-risk populations is one of the most important steps to help prevent infections, save lives and minimise adverse outcomes. Information must be provided in multiple formats and local languages to address the barriers which older people often face, related to literacy, language and disability.

4. Access and support

Specific measures to support older people must be implemented during an outbreak. These include access to alcohol-based hand rubs where there is poor access to water; access to social support and essential supplies for older people in quarantine or self-isolating; and a proportionate and non-discriminatory approach to restrictions on freedom of movement. Communities must work together to ensure everyone’s wellbeing during the response.

5. Conflict and displacement settings

Contingency planning by governments and humanitarian agencies must address the high risks faced by older refugees and displaced people and provide for access to health treatment and care, including access to national health systems and hospitals, regardless of legal status.

6. Development and humanitarian funding

Older people are frequently overlooked in development and humanitarian strategy development and funding. In the context of Covid-19 and the risk posed to older people, they must be explicitly identified and considered in funding applications and decisions at all levels and in all settings.