

COVID-19: AGE-FRIENDLY HEALTH SYSTEMS NEEDED MORE THAN EVER

A Movement to Support Health Systems Caring for Most Vulnerable Patients During Pandemic



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COVID-19 places an incredible strain on our nation's health systems. Through the Age-Friendly Health Systems

movement, The John A. Hartford Foundation, Institute for Healthcare Improvement, American Hospital Association, and Catholic Health Association of the United States support systems serving as the first line of defense. Hospitals and health systems across the country share best practices for treating older adults—the most vulnerable population—in a safe and age-friendly way, without placing unsustainable burdens on themselves.

WHAT IS THE AGE-FRIENDLY HEALTH SYSTEMS MOVEMENT?

TF: The Age-Friendly Health Systems movement is improving care for older adults in the U.S. It is designed around four essential, interrelated elements that guide health care interactions with older patients. The first is what matters to the patient. Especially during times of crisis when so much care is focused on life preservation, systems should know and align care with older patients' health goals and care preferences. The next element is mentation. Core to this is preventing, identifying, treating, and managing dementia, depression, and delirium in older patients. The third element is mobility, ensuring older adults move safely every day. The last element is medication. If medication is necessary, clinicians should prescribe age-friendly medications that don't interfere with what matters to the patient, nor affect their mobility or mentation. Taken together, we call these the "4Ms" and there is both a solid evidence and business case behind them. Participating systems receive expert technical support and share best practices to ensure older adults receive age-friendly care.

WHY IS AGE-FRIENDLY CARE SO IMPORTANT RIGHT NOW?

TF: Older adult patients already require special attention and a unique approach to care by health systems and this crisis emphasizes that need. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, eight of every 10 deaths associated with COVID-19 occur in patients over the age of 65. Hospitals and health systems need support as emergency and medical departments reach capacity with patients experiencing COVID-19 symptoms, especially older patients. The Age-Friendly Health Systems Initiative provides that support and facilitates health systems learning from each other to improve the care delivered to older people.

DO THE "4MS" MATTER DURING A PANDEMIC?

TF: If anything, the "4Ms" of age-friendly care—what matters, mentation, mobility, and medication—are more important

now during this crisis. Older adults are more likely to be affected by COVID-19 symptoms and measures to keep the public safe, like social distancing, put older adults at an increased risk of developing mentation issues like depression or delirium. These social distancing measures can negatively affect older adults' mobility, with fewer opportunities and places for safe exercise, leading to declines in function. The pandemic could result in older patients having a harder time managing their various medications. Going to the pharmacy presents risks, navigating the process of obtaining prescriptions by mail may be challenging, or home care nurses or family members may be unable to visit older adults to sort pills and ensure they're taking medications as scheduled. Finally, clinicians are under stress, systems are at capacity, and older adults are at higher risk for developing serious illness, including ventilation, that could prevent them from expressing their wishes for care. Understanding what matters to patients is more critical than ever, given the high mortality of this virus in older adults. Advance care plans and goals of care are essential first steps in care planning; however, clinicians must be cautious of the risk of potential misunderstandings. As COVID-19 creates difficult triaging decisions, we must carefully consider treatment and end-of-life care decisions, based on what matters most to the person.

HOW ARE WE HELPING DURING THIS CRISIS?

TF: We're here to help hospitals and health systems, especially during this crisis, deliver the care older patients need, while they do everything in their power to slow the spread of COVID-19. The more than 550 Age-Friendly Health Systems clinical sites are discovering and sharing best practices related to COVID-19 care for older adults—including guides to telehealth and redesigned emergency department care for older adults, forming collaborations with public health and aging services organizations to prevent social isolation, and collective advocacy for longer-term policy change. Join the Age-Friendly Health Systems movement, it's free and all materials are open source. ●

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