

CAREGIVING DURING THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Within the last several weeks, Oklahoma, along with the rest of the United States and the world, entered an unprecedented time. As COVID-19 continues to spread, public officials have implemented new policies regarding social spaces, increasing to shelter-in-place orders across the state.

Kris Struckmeyer, Oklahoma State University Extension assistant specialist, said many families are left to figure out how to both work from home, as well as help continue their children's educations.

"But for some families, it isn't about trying to figure out 'new' math or brushing off their geography skills, but instead, how to best care for an aging relative," Struckmeyer said.

Coronavirus disease 2019, also known as COVID-19, is a respiratory illness that can be transmitted by close contact with an infected person through droplets produced when they cough or sneeze. Another way the disease can be transmitted is coming in contact with a surface or object that has the droplets on it, then touching their mouth, nose or eyes. Some symptoms include fever, cough and shortness of breath. While some patients have reported mild cases, individuals with weakened immune systems, such as older adults or those with asthma, are at an increased risk for severe – even deadly – respiratory symptoms.

"So, what can caregivers do to protect themselves and their loved ones? First and foremost, it is vital as the caregiver to keep yourself well," he said. "Wash your hands frequently for at least 20 seconds with soap and warm water. Caregivers also should avoid crowds. This has become a little easier as people are sheltering at home."

Other tips include coughing or sneezing into the bend of your elbow or a disposable tissue and cleaning frequently touched surfaces in your home. This includes mobility and medical equipment.

Not only do caregivers need to keep themselves well, they also need to keep their loved one well, too.

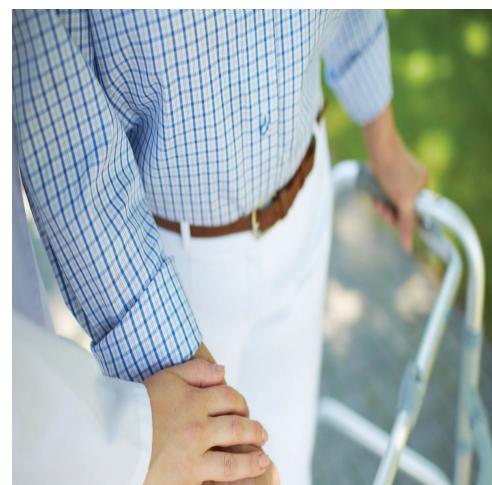
"To help reduce the risk of exposure, take your loved one to the emergency room only if they're having difficulty breathing or a very high fever," Struckmeyer said. "Otherwise, your best bet is to call your healthcare provider. Check into telehealth options. Medicare has expanded benefits for telehealth."

He also suggests helping your loved one remember to wash their hands. Caregivers could even put written notes around the house with reminders. For those fortunate enough to have hand sanitizer in the home, keep it out in the open so it serves as a visual reminder to use it. Also, have an alternate plan in mind in the event that you as the primary caregiver becomes ill.

"In these times, it's important to remember that social distancing doesn't mean isolation. Encourage your loved one to think beyond their circle of friends and reach out to neighbors or congregation members," he said. "Thankfully during this time, technology can help with social distancing while still feeling in touch. Show your loved one how to video chat with a loved one, or make the call yourself and hand off the phone."

While technology is a wonderful tool to use, going old-school can be just as much fun. Struckmeyer said. Ask other family members and friends to write letters or cards to help lift your loved one's spirits.

"Above all, always ensure your loved one feels included. As we are all homebound during this unprecedented time, it may be a good idea to ask your loved one to complete a project," he said. "Be sure that the project is something that excites them and keeps them engaged, though it does not need to be a large project. This also is a great time to get your loved one to tell stories of their youth. Record short videos or audio tapes to capture these precious memories."



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