



## **COVID-19 Guidance for Peers and Community Health Workers**

Peers and community health workers (CHWs) have changed how they work while serving the most marginalized and at-risk members of our communities in New York City during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these communities — including low-income New Yorkers, immigrants, people with no documents, people requiring mental and physical health services, people experiencing addiction and people with justice-involvement, among others — are currently most at risk for or impacted by COVID-19. Recent data reveal the COVID-19 pandemic has disproportionately impacted Latino and Black communities.

Peers and CHWs do important work to support the community, and their health and safety is critically important. This document provides strategies for peers and CHWs to keep themselves and those they serve safe during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **How to Talk to Community Members About COVID-19**

It is important to provide clear and accurate information about COVID-19 and how community engagement and services have been modified to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

#### **Provide Clear Information About COVID-19 and Its Symptoms**

COVID-19 is the disease caused by a new coronavirus. It is a respiratory illness (which affects breathing) and can spread from person to person. Peers and CHWs should remind community members that most people with COVID-19 have mild to moderate symptoms and fully recover without complications. However, in some people, COVID-19 may lead to pneumonia, hospitalization or death.

People with these symptoms may have COVID-19:

- Cough
- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
- Fever
- Chills
- Muscle pain
- Sore throat
- New loss of taste or smell

Other less common symptoms have been reported and include nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. Older adults may show confusion or disorientation and experience falls.

Children have similar symptoms as adults and generally have mild illness. Recently, doctors identified a rare but serious condition in some children, called multisystem inflammatory systems in children (MIS-C), which is associated with COVID-19. For more information, visit [nyc.gov/health/coronavirus](https://www.nyc.gov/health/coronavirus) and search for **MIS-C**.

### **Explain the Risks for COVID-19, Including Who Is at Higher Risk for Severe Illness**

Peers and CHWs should share information with community members about how people who are most at risk for severe illness are people age 50 and older (people age 65 and older are at highest risk) and people who have other health conditions, such as:

- Lung disease or moderate to severe asthma
- Heart disease or other serious heart conditions
- A weakened immune system
- Obesity
- Diabetes
- Kidney disease
- Liver disease
- Cancer

If a community member is an older adult or has any of the health conditions listed above and experiences COVID-19 symptoms, peers and CHWs should advise them to tell their health care provider and seek medical care.

### **Share Clear Guidance About Preventing the Spread of COVID-19**

It is important to try to prevent the spread of COVID-19 by being careful in all interactions with others. Peers and CHWs should share clear guidance with community members about how COVID-19 spreads, and explain how services and activities must be changed to protect everyone.

- The virus that causes COVID-19 is found in droplets that are spread when a person with COVID-19 coughs or sneezes, and possibly when they sing or talk. Staying at least 6 feet away from others helps protect people from these droplets.
- The virus may live on different types of surfaces for different periods of time. After touching surfaces, COVID-19 can be spread if someone touches their eyes, nose or mouth with unwashed hands.
- Not everyone who is sick will show symptoms, but people without symptoms can still spread the virus that causes COVID-19 to others.

To help prevent the spread of COVID-19, peers and CHWs should follow these guidelines and share them with community members:

- **Wash hands often:** Practice healthy hand hygiene by washing hands often, especially before and after going outside or after touching things outside the home.

Wash hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, or use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer (with at least 60% alcohol) when soap and water are not available.

- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue or your arm when sneezing or coughing. Do not use your hands.
- Do not touch your eyes, nose, or mouth with unwashed hands.
- Clean frequently touched surfaces, such as counters, doorknobs, faucets, remote controls and phones, after each use or at least once every day. Use a household cleaning spray or disinfecting wipe.
- **Practice social (physical) distancing:** Stay home as much as possible. Avoid close contact and keep at least 6 feet of distance between you and other people you do not live with. Avoid crowds and nonessential travel. If possible, work from home.
  - This may mean interacting with others from farther away (for example, from the sidewalk or through a window), using the phone to make calls and send texts, and avoiding hugs, handshakes and other physical interactions.
- **Wear face coverings:** Wear a face covering when outside your home if you cannot maintain at least 6 feet of distance from others, as required by a New York State Executive Order. A face covering is any well-secured paper or cloth (like a bandana or scarf) that covers your nose and mouth. Wash your cloth face covering in a washing machine or by hand, and make sure it is completely dry before using it again.
  - For more information about face coverings and how to make them, visit [nyc.gov/facecoverings](https://nyc.gov/facecoverings).

### **What to Do If a Community Member Thinks They Might Be Sick**

If a community member thinks they might be sick, peers and CHWs should ask them if it is okay to review their symptoms with them and any risk factors they may have.

- If a community member says they have **mild to moderate symptoms**, peers and CHWs should advise them to stay home, and ask them if they have a doctor.
  - ***If they have a doctor***, advise community members to call their doctor to discuss their symptoms and what they should do.
  - ***If they do not have a doctor***, advise community members to call **311** and say they are in need of a doctor — 311 operators can direct them to one that will see them regardless of health care coverage, ability to pay, or immigration status.
- If a community member says they have **severe symptoms** (trouble breathing, persistent pain or pressure in the chest, new confusion or inability to stay awake, bluish lips or face), peers and CHWs should advise them to call **911**.

### **Supporting and Sharing Resources With Community Members**

Peers and CHWs are a critical source of support for many New Yorkers. Community members are likely experiencing stress and anxiety related to COVID-19 and from everyday life.

It can be difficult to access basic needs like food, housing and employment because so many businesses and organizations have shut down to prevent the spread of COVID-19. It is natural for everyone, including peers and CHWs, to feel overwhelmed, sad, anxious, stressed or afraid.

Peers and CHWs should acknowledge what people are feeling, and let people know where to get support. They can help people in the community by pointing them to resources and information. They can also speak to their program supervisor about:

- Learning where to find information online, such as [nyc.gov/health/coronavirus](https://nyc.gov/health/coronavirus) and [cdc.gov/coronavirus](https://cdc.gov/coronavirus).
- Using technology like smartphones and tablets to share resources with the community.
- Addressing any questions or concerns from community members that they do not know how to answer.

If a community member is in need of assistance, peers and CHWs can share the following resources with them:

- Visit [nyc.gov/coronavirus](https://nyc.gov/coronavirus) and search for **Resources for New Yorkers** to find employment, food, housing and other assistance programs and resources for which community members may be eligible.
- Visit [nyc.gov/health/coronavirus](https://nyc.gov/health/coronavirus) and search for **COVID-19: Coping and Emotional Well-Being** for more information about reducing stress and managing anxiety.
- Text “COVID” to 692-692 for real-time updates. Message and data rates may apply.
- Contact NYC Well, a confidential, 24/7 helpline staffed by trained counselors who provide brief counseling and referrals to care in over 200 languages. Call 888-NYC-WELL (888-692-9355), text “WELL” to 65173 or chat at [nyc.gov/nycwell](https://nyc.gov/nycwell).
  - NYC Well’s website also offers a number of well-being and emotional support applications (apps), visit [nyc.gov/nycwell](https://nyc.gov/nycwell) and click on “App Library.”
- Contact the New York State COVID-19 Emotional Support Helpline. Call 844-863-9314 from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m., seven days a week, to talk to specially trained volunteer professionals who are there to listen, support and offer referrals, if needed.

**The NYC Health Department may change recommendations as the situation evolves. 5.25.20**