

Challenges and guidance for implementing social distancing for COVID-19 in care homes: a mixed methods rapid review

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Plain language summary

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Plain language summary

Older people living in care homes are at risk of poor health and death if they get coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). To protect older people from COVID-19, care homes use different measures, including social distancing and isolation. These measures can be challenging. Our research aimed to explore the challenges and solutions to using social distancing and isolation in care homes.

We reviewed existing evidence to examine how care homes have used social distancing and isolation measures to control the spread of COVID-19 and other contagious diseases. We investigated how social distancing and isolation measures have been used in six care homes in England. We spoke with residents, families and staff. We collected care home documents and other data. We held group discussions with senior health and care leaders.

The review showed limited research and the limited nature of policy documentation on social distancing and isolation measures. Interviews revealed that social distancing and isolation measures were difficult, and sometimes impossible, for staff to implement. These measures made care homes feel less homely and inhibited touch, for example hugs. Residents and families valued the work of care homes to keep residents safe and the use of technology for keeping connected. Social distancing, isolation and related restrictions negatively affected residents' physical, psychological, social and cognitive well-being. There were feelings of powerlessness for families whose loved ones had moved into the care home during the pandemic. It was challenging for care homes to capture frequent updates in policy and guidance. Senior health and care leaders shared that the care home sector felt isolated from the National Health Service, communication from government to the care home sector was described as chaotic and trauma was inflicted on care home staff, residents, families and friends.

These findings have been used to design guidance to help care homes implement social distancing and isolation measures both now and for any future outbreaks.

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