How older adults (and their caregivers) can prepare to weather the coronavirus pandemic

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In these times of uncertainty, it can be challenging to know how to prepare yourself and your family for a period of illness or “quarantine,” self-isolation, or potentially long periods of disruption due to restrictions on business and local services. These situations can be especially challenging for older adults, many of whom might have underlying medical problems that put them at higher risk for infection or serious illness with COVID-19. In addition, many older adults rely on the help of a caregiver (such as a family member, friend, or home health aide) to navigate their day-to-day life. Disruption in local services, transportation, and healthcare can lead to unique challenges for older individuals. Older adults and their caregivers should take the following steps to prepare for the impact of coronavirus on their community.

**Stay informed.** It is important to call your specific medical providers to understand how they will be handling routine and urgent health care—are they seeing patients in the office, doing telephone visits, or video visits? If you have home health providers come to your home, will they still be coming as scheduled? Keep up with federal, state, and local guidance.

**Make a Plan B.** What happens if your Plan A (existing services or caregiver) can’t work? What is your back-up plan? Think about what will happen if you or your caregiver should become ill, or if they are unable to leave their home because of self-quarantine or other issues. Will you need help at home if you become ill? If so, who will be able to help you? What is your plan in case your caregiver becomes ill or isn’t able to help you for a few weeks? If you have physical limitations, who will help you to move around your home? Who will help with other important tasks, like cooking, cleaning, or bathing, if you or your caretaker becomes ill? It is important to finalize a plan for how you will get vital care and supplies (such as groceries or medications); consider setting up a meal delivery service or grocery deliveries.

**Collect necessary documents.** In case you get very ill and need to seek medical care, it is important that you have copies of important paperwork available. Caregivers can help collect these documents and ensure that they are available for healthcare providers to review. Consider completing a care plan, which lists your medical conditions, allergies, and contact information for family members or other caretakers. Your care plan should also include an updated list of your medications, including dosages. You might consider having a copy of your identification card, insurance card, recent medical records, and other important documents (such as “power of attorney” or “do not resuscitate” information, if applicable). Keep this information with you in your purse or wallet.

**Prepare an emergency supply kit.** If possible, you should possess at least a one-month supply of all of your prescription medications, in case illness causes you to be unable to leave your home, or restrictions in your city limit your ability to access a pharmacy or your doctor’s office. Check your medications carefully and notify your doctor if you need refills on medications that you take daily. Make sure you
have hearing aids and extra batteries, glasses or contact lenses, or medical devices (such as a walker or cane) available in your home. Also check to make sure you have enough medical supplies, such as a glucometer and test strips for testing blood sugar, alcohol swabs or needles for injectable medications like insulin, or pads for urinary incontinence. Also consider purchasing a thermometer or over-the-counter medications (such as pain relievers, stomach remedies, or vitamins). Finally, make sure you have a sufficient supply of food, water, and other household items, in case you are ordered to remain in your home for prolonged periods of time.

**Communicate about your care preferences.** Talk with family, caretakers, and your doctors about your health, and make sure they know how you would want to be cared for if you were to become seriously ill. It may be helpful to determine who will help you make health decisions in an emergency situation. Make sure your caretakers have a copy of any health care paperwork, such as a “power of attorney” form or a “do not resuscitate” form.

**Know what to do if you or family/caregiver get sick.** If you develop symptoms of a COVID-19 infection, such as fevers, cough, muscle aches, nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea, contact your doctor’s office or your local health department prior to seeking care; a health provider will direct you to appropriate care or testing. If you develop severe symptoms, call 9-1-1 or go to the closest hospital; notify providers or emergency personnel that you are concerned about coronavirus.

Avoid close contact with anyone who feels ill. If your family or caretaker becomes sick, create a plan for limiting your contact at home (such as sleeping in a separate room, and frequently cleaning surfaces you might have touched).

**Stay connected and help others get prepared for an emergency.** Social connections are extremely important for maintaining your physical and mental well-being and can be maintained while “social-distancing.” This is a time to renew relationships with friends and family through with phone calls or video chats. Share these tips with others you know, and talk to your friends, families, and neighbors about how they plan to stay safe.

The coronavirus pandemic has pushed all of us into uncharted territory. In particular, older adults and their caretakers can use advanced planning to reduce the fear and risk associated with coronavirus.