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Coronavirus Prevention: Tips for Alzheimer's Family Caregivers

If you are family caregiver of a person living with Alzheimer's or another dementia-related illness, preventing the spread of illness is important, particularly as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) continues to make headlines. The Alzheimer's Foundation of America (AFA) is sharing personal care recommendations to help guard against infection.

"For starters, be sure not to spread *unnecessary* alarm about coronavirus to the person you care for," says Allison B. Reiss, M.D., AFA Medical, Scientific & Memory Screening Advisory Board Member, Head of the Inflammation Laboratory at NYU Winthrop Hospital Research Institute and Associate Professor of Medicine at NYU Long Island School of Medicine. "The best way to prevent illness is simply to avoid being exposed to the virus, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The next best thing is to encourage everyday preventative measures to avoid the spread of respiratory disease."

Because some people living with Alzheimer's may have a sensitivity to water, here are some tips to help keep them free from infection:

- While the CDC recommends that persons wash their hands with soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after going to the bathroom, before eating, and after blowing their nose, coughing, or sneezing, it may be difficult to achieve this with a person living with a dementia. Caregivers may be able to encourage more frequent and/or longer hand washing by singing two choruses of "Happy Birthday."
- Use a soothing tone to encourage washing and understand that you may need to explain what to do slowly and step by step. Some people with dementia are no longer able to sequence (i.e., they can't anticipate what step is coming next.). You may want to say, "First, let's wet our hands under the water." When that is done, "Then we will use the soap dispenser to squeeze out some soap into your hands." Then, "Rub your hands together with the soap. Lather the backs of your hands.... Lather between your fingers.... Lather under your nails."
- Consider using a fragranced soap such as lavender to improve the sensory experience for your person. Soap dispensers may be easier and safer to use than bars of soap for a person with dementia, but use whichever your person prefers. Keep bars of soap free of water, so they can dry between washings. If the soap is wet, simply rinse it off before lathering.
- Use your own hands to model what needs to be done.
- Make sure the room temperature is comfortable when washing.
- If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol, according to the CDC.
- Make supplies easy to access, such as tissues, wipes and hand sanitizers, near the locations where your person spends most of their time.
- Use hand sanitizers and disinfectant wipes for fast fixes around the home.