Recreation During Communicable Disease Outbreaks in Memory Care Settings

Purpose

Maintaining safe, meaningful recreation during all outbreaks is essential to preserving the dignity, wellbeing, and quality of life of residents in memory care. This document aims to support memory care teams during communicable disease outbreaks to maintain both physical safety and resident-centered care, through a balance of Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) measures and thoughtful engagement strategies. The Outbreak Management AHS webpage remains the primary resource.

1. Context/Background

Loneliness is a distressing subjective feeling that accompanies the perception of unmet social needs. Socialization is associated with improved cognition, mood, and memory retention, reduced depression and anxiety and enhanced quality of life. Anecdotally, ongoing recreation activities during outbreaks contribute to resident-centered care by improving engagement and morale. Recreation helps reduce behavioral and psychological symptoms of dementia and some medication use. Facetime (virtual) visits and dedicated spaces enhance experience.

2. Recommendations

Recreation should continue during outbreaks whenever possible. Activity restrictions should be based on a risk assessment that considers the pathogen, resident risk factors, and outbreak severity.

Preparation and education

- Before an outbreak, proactively work with families to plan activities that will keep residents engaged if additional precautions (isolation) are required. This can include scheduled visits, identifying preferences, and setting up in-room activities (e.g., puzzles, sensory items). Collaborate with the multidisciplinary team to support resident needs.
- Ensure basic needs are consistently met, including snacks, fluids, toileting, and social interaction. A consistent caregiving team reduces anxiety, agitation, and wandering in residents with dementia, while familiar staff can spot subtle changes and respond early.
- Education should focus on redirection, identifying triggers, and providing non-restrictive support. Ongoing education ensures safe, consistent, and compassionate care.

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Prioritize reducing infection risk during outbreaks

- **Infection control:** follow outbreak environmental cleaning and disinfection, hand hygiene, and encourage physically distanced activities. During respiratory illness outbreaks, follow masking protocols.
- **Infection control:** exclude symptomatic residents from group activities.
- **Staffing:** ensure adequate supervision and support for all residents, especially those with memory care concerns.

Considerations

- Smaller groups of asymptomatic residents, no shared items or food
- Increase cleaning and disinfection
- Use dedicated supplies for each resident when crafting and coloring
- Avoid activities that involve passing objects, **and**
- No external recreation guests.

Focus on alternatives to singing/ Incorporate music creatively

- Play background music, staff singing with PPE, family singing via Facetime/virtually.
- Engage residents to create music (play piano, yoga ball drumming)
- **One-on-One:** Nail/hair care, coloring, crafts, games.
- **Group:** Movies, story time, balloon toss (individual balloon), bingo (with wipeable cards and pens), reminisce kits.
- **Innovative tools:** Tovertafel (magic table), light boards.
- Pet/animal therapy and scenic bus rides with asymptomatic residents, in consultation with the Public Health Outbreak Team and IPC, to implement modifications aimed at reducing risk.

Encourage use of technology as part of alternatives to singing

- **Tablets:** Explore using tablets for engaging activities like looking at pictures, connecting with loved ones, listening to music, or playing simple games
- **Virtual Reality:** Promote using virtual reality experiences to provide stimulating and engaging experiences.
- Use of TVs to play videos (sing-along with Suzie, name that tune).

Music therapy-singing

Singing may facilitate the spread of respiratory pathogens through droplets and aerosols. During respiratory outbreaks, this risk may be amplified due to potential for asymptomatic or pre-symptomatic infectiousness. Despite singing being a preferred recreation activity for memory care residents, during outbreaks, it is important to balance resident wellbeing with transmission of infectious pathogens. Consideration of lower risk singing practice during respiratory outbreaks should ONLY be done in consultation with the Public Health Outbreak Team and IPC, taking into account the extent and severity of the outbreak, the pathogen involved, facility infrastructure, staffing and other factors.

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Sing safely – risk mitigation strategies

- Singer mask-wearing, ventilation, and physical distancing
- Solo singer preferred instead of a chorus
- The singer should wear a mask or face shield while singing loudly, as this reduces droplets to levels comparable with normal talking
- Consider staff-led singing while wearing appropriate PPE as a lower-risk alternative to resident group singing, and
- Outdoor settings are preferred for vocal activities.

If you have any questions or wish to discuss outbreak recreation activities on memory care units in more detail, reach out to your continuing care IPC contact.

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3. Definitions

Term	Meaning
Dementia	A set of symptoms and signs associated with a progressive deterioration of cognitive functions that affect daily activities.
Socialization	Engagement in meaningful social interactions and activities with others (e.g., group activities, communication, and participation in social networks) that support cognitive, emotional, and overall well-being.

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