

# Viral respiratory infection on the rise in aged care population

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New research from the Registry of Senior Australians at SAHMRI has shown viral respiratory infections have been increasing among Australia's residential aged care population even before COVID-19.

The four-year study of 270,000 aged care residents found that one in ten are hospitalized with a viral respiratory infection and 30% of those patients die either in hospital or within 30 days of being discharged.

Associate Professor Gill Caughey, ROSA's Associate Director, says studies on the impact of viral respiratory infections in aged care were scarce prior to COVID-19 and the pandemic has highlighted the urgent need for more research in the area.

"The risk factors for hospitalization and death in those with viral respiratory infections we identified in our study are very similar to those that apply to being hospitalized for COVID and they also share the potential to be fatal." A/Prof Caughey said.

"It's crucial that we understand the likelihood of those living in aged care contracting this [disease](#), potential outcomes, and resources associated with caring for these individuals, so that facilities can take appropriate measures to mitigate the danger and adequately care for them."

The number of older people with viral respiratory infections increased by 6% from 2013 to 2016 when the latest data was available.

The combination of Australia's aging population and high volume of comorbid chronic diseases among older citizens may be contributing to the steady rise in cases.

A/Prof Caughey says the average person entering aged care now is sicker than in the past and there's nothing to suggest the rate of respiratory viral infections won't continue to grow.

"Our treatment of previously fatal diseases has improved over time," A/Prof Caughey said.

"This is resulting in more people living longer with a higher burden of chronic disease that makes them more susceptible to acute diseases like respiratory infections."

Those most at risk of having poor outcomes when having a respiratory infection are males living with multiple chronic conditions, particularly heart disease, hypertension and chronic respiratory disease.

"These findings really highlight the need for prioritizing vaccination for older Australians living in residential aged care and their care workers, in addition to other increased infection controls," A/Prof Caughey said.

"It's essential that aged care homes seriously look at implementing long term strategies that will reduce the risk of respiratory [infection](#) for their residents."

**More information:** Gillian E. Caughey et al, Hospitalisation for lower respiratory viral infections in older people in residential aged care facilities, *Australasian Journal on Ageing* (2021). [DOI: 10.1111/ajag.12976](#)

Provided by South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute (SAHMRI)

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