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Covid: Care home isolation rule axed for low-risk trips in England

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Coronavirus pandemic



Care home residents will be able to leave their home for low-risk trips without having to self-isolate for 14 days afterwards, the government says.

The rules will be relaxed in England from Tuesday, allowing for walks or garden visits without self-isolation.

The government says a fall in Covid cases means it is "much safer" for care home residents to go outside.

The charity John's Campaign says it is a "chink of light" for residents and their families.

But co-founder Julia Jones said she wanted to see the full guidance before making a decision about the charity's threat of legal action against the government's 14-day self-isolation requirement.

"I still struggle to see what legal right the government thinks it has for preventing people with full mental capacity walking out of their homes the

same as any other member of the population," she told BBC Radio 4's Today programme.

There are different rules in the UK's devolved nations, with residents in Wales able to leave homes - where there is no Covid outbreak - without isolating on their return.

Scotland's guidance for care homes allows for residents to see loved ones outside of the care home, while rules for care homes in Northern Ireland vary by region.

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Under the changes in England, residents on trips out must be accompanied by either a member of staff or one of their two nominated visitors and they must follow social distancing throughout.

They cannot meet in groups or go indoors, except for the use of toilets, and public transport should be avoided where possible.

An exemption is in place for those who wish to vote in person in the local elections on 6 May, the government says.

Only trips deemed "low risk" are exempt from the self-isolation rule, so this does not include activities such as overnight visits.

The Department of Health and Social Care said updated guidance would be published in due course.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said he was "pleased" residents can "now leave their homes to reunite with their loved ones outdoors".

"With the data continuing to head in the right direction and as restrictions ease, it is my priority to keep increasing visits for residents in the coming weeks in a safe and controlled way," he said.



Analysis

By Alison Holt
Social affairs correspondent

Fourteen days is a long time to be stuck in your room because you have ventured out with a relative for a walk or a visit to a park.

Guidance put in place to protect people from a virus which has claimed so many lives in care homes has more recently become a source of great anguish for many residents and families.

As life has begun to open up for others, younger people with disabilities, as well as older residents, have felt unable to leave their care home, trapped by the requirement to self-isolate on return.

Government guidance is there to balance the risks faced by an extremely vulnerable group of people, but with most residents vaccinated and infection rates falling, families complain that the guidance is too slow to change.

They argue that with each month of restrictions, the damage to the people they love deepens.

Care Minister Helen Whately said: "I know residents and their families have found the restrictions on trips out of care homes incredibly difficult.

"This is one more step towards getting back to normal, while protecting care homes from the continued risk of Covid-19."

The government is expected to review the self-isolation requirement for more visits when it reaches the next stage of the government's road map for easing restrictions on 17 May.

Ms Jones from John's Campaign said it seemed "massively inadequate" to retain any restrictions on leaving care homes. Keeping residents "under surveillance" had a "terrible impact", particularly on younger people living in care homes, she said.

She said: "It's not just about going for a walk in the park, it's about meaningful contact and inclusion in society and everyday life."

"It's about equal access to healthcare, it's about equal access to the outside world. It's about being treated as a person in a home not some sort of second-class citizen with no rights or choices."

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Campaigners say the rule encourages care homes to act unlawfully by "falsely imprisoning" residents, with family members calling it "barbaric".

Leigh Day partner Tessa Gregory, who is representing John's Campaign, said: "It appears under the threat of legal proceedings, which the John's Campaign were due to issue next week, the government has finally agreed to drop the blanket requirement that care home residents self-isolate for 14 days following any visit out.

"This will be a huge relief to residents, families and care homes who have all been crying out for change."

She added they would be "scrutinising" the new guidance once it is published "to ensure that it is lawful and fit for purpose".

The Independent Care Group also welcomed the move, saying a lack of social contact and visits has been detrimental to the health of residents.

Mike Padgham, the group's chair, told BBC Radio York the decision could have come earlier, adding that residents' human rights had been breached "to an extent" by the rules.

"Who are we to say that just because people live in a care home that you can't do this, you can't do that? Everyone in this country deserves freedom and when people see the rest of the country being unlocked it seems very unfair on these clients," he said.

However, Nadra Ahmed, executive chairman of the National Care Association said that while it was a "cautious step forward", care homes still had to deal with insurance policies that do not cover them if residents catch Covid.

"One claim would be it for us," she told BBC Radio 4's Today programme, urging the government to underwrite the risk of care home residents going out and mixing with the general population.

Care home residents in England have been allowed one regular visitor since 8 March, in the first easing of lockdown.

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