Serious Illness Conversations during COVID-19
(For clients at high risk of serious complications if they contract COVID-19)

This is a difficult and scary time with the coronavirus. I’m hoping we can talk about what is important to you, so that we can provide you with the best care possible. Is that okay?

What do you understand about how the coronavirus could affect your health?
May I share with you our understanding of how the coronavirus could affect your health?

There are many people who get better on their own after getting infected with the coronavirus.

I hope you don’t get infected, but if you do I worry that your [age / other health conditions] puts you at a higher risk of serious complications and may make it more difficult to survive. I wonder if we can talk about what’s important to you if things don’t go as we hope.

[Pause, respond to emotion].

What would be most important for your healthcare providers or loved ones to know if you became very sick?

With all that’s going on, what are you most worried about?

What everyday abilities are so important to you that you can’t imagine living without them?

Some people make decisions to avoid certain treatments if they are unlikely to help or may cause more suffering. Have you thought about circumstances or situations that you would want to avoid if you became sicker?

If you couldn’t speak for yourself, who do you trust to make medical decisions for you?

How much do they know about what is important to you?

This can be hard to talk about. I really appreciate you sharing this information with me.

I’ve heard you say that____is really important to you. Given what you told me, and what we know about your current health, I would recommend that we____. Is that okay?

[Potential Recommendations - see Recommendation Guide for more suggestions]:

- Referrals to other team members
- Code status / MOST review or change
- Follow-up plan
- Communicate wishes with loved ones

We can revisit this at any time.

We will do everything we can to help you [and your family] through this.
CONTEXT AND DESCRIPTION

Why? Communicating with patients about serious illness is challenging under the best of circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic reinforces the need for conversations that enable patients with serious illness or other risk factors to understand the potential impact of COVID-19 on their health, to share their worries, values, and priorities, and to make informed decisions. This tool aims to make it easier for clinicians to have these discussions in a trustworthy and compassionate way during this time of uncertainty and distress.

Who? Patients who have underlying health conditions are at increased risk of critical illness or death from COVID-19 infection. While there is still a lot to learn about this infection, the highest risk patients may include older adults, those who are immunocompromised, and/or patients with one or more of the following underlying conditions:

- Cardiovascular or cerebrovascular disease
- Pulmonary disease
- Advanced cancer
- Chronic renal disease
- Diabetes and hypertension
- Frailty

What? Engage in a conversation with the patient or Substitute Decision Maker to:

1. Share the risk of critical illness due to COVID-19 because of underlying health conditions
2. Understand their priorities, values, and preferences in this context
3. Acknowledge and respond to emotions
4. Make a recommendation about next steps
5. Document the conversation and care plan

When? Early! Ideally at a time when the patient is feeling well. Build this into an existing contact or schedule a separate contact for this conversation.

How?

1. Watch the demo video and review the guide.
2. Read the guide aloud before using it with a patient or substitute decision maker.
3. This is a guide, not a script. Please keep in mind your scope of practice and level of comfort engaging in this conversation. Seek guidance from your Practice Lead/RPACE Lead as needed.
4. Use silence and acknowledge emotions when they arise.
5. When unable to have this conversation in person, consider using video where possible rather than phone.
6. When working with interpreters, have a discussion with the interpreter in advance to review the Guide and discuss potential challenges.
7. Reiterate your ongoing support to the patient [and family].