

The impact of COVID-19 on older adults in our community

This Vital Focus report looks back on the secondary effects of the pandemic on older adults.

The pandemic is not over but, in some ways where we are today looks different from where we were a year ago, with many people vaccinated against COVID-19. At the same time, the rise of Omicron has once again led to restrictions to slow the spread of this virus.

Looking back, the impacts of the pandemic on older adults were numerous and can compound, leading to decreased mental and physical health. And in looking back, we can learn what is needed for the future.

We are all impacted by COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has had wide-reaching effects on all aspects of our work, family and social lives. We all experience and cope with the COVID-19 pandemic in our own way. The Vital Focus series examines the impacts of measures in place to control COVID-19 on health and wellbeing in our community.



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Who are older adults?

Older adults are individuals who are 65 years old and older. Sometimes people age 55 years and older are also considered to be older adults.¹

The pandemic has impacted older adults significantly and in a variety of ways. Some older adults may be at increased risk of experiencing these negative effects of the pandemic, including older adults who identify as Black, Indigenous, or People of Colour, older adults with disabilities and those with underlying health conditions.¹

- **Older adults have been identified as being at increased risk of severe effects of COVID-19.**^{2,3,4,5} This is often due to underlying medical conditions and weaker immune systems as a result of aging.^{6,7}
- **Older adults experienced an increase in loneliness and social isolation** due to physical distancing measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 infection. Social isolation has been identified as a risk factor for negative health effects and is connected to an increase in risk of dementia and cognitive decline in older adults.^{8,9,10} Social isolation may also increase the risk of elder abuse, especially when coupled with negative effects of the pandemic on caregivers' mental health.^{29,44}
- **COVID-19 has impacted mental health.** Older adults experience a unique and increased risk of depression and anxiety as a result of social isolation.^{23,24} For older adults, the pandemic may have contributed to the emergence or exacerbation of mental health issues, such as stress, anxiety, depression and substance use.^{1,5,6,8}
- **The experience of grief and loss has been altered by COVID-19.** Due to physical distancing guidelines, many rituals linked with celebrations of life or mourning of death have been drastically altered.¹⁹ The disruption of these rituals has reduced the social support for older adults in times of difficulty.²⁰ Religious communities were also disrupted by the distancing guidelines, which limited the social connections and support that people who are part of religious communities previously relied upon.²⁰ Additionally, COVID-19 restrictions, cases and deaths in long-term care facilities have led to increased grief and loss for residents and their caregivers, families and friends.^{21,22}

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Daily routines provide structure for those living with dementia.

For those living with dementia, daily routines are important as they provide structure to the day and can serve as reminders for important tasks, such as taking medicine.²⁹ Caregivers have expressed that they are feeling an increase in caring responsibility which could lead to exhaustion, development of sleep problems, feelings of depression and anxiety, a lack of time and potential injuries as a result of providing care.²

■ **There were new or increased barriers to accessing mental health and health care services.** Many services and supports faced various restrictions throughout the pandemic.^{46,47,48} Further, some older adults may have been reluctant to access in-person services (such as home care) due to fear of being exposed to the COVID-19 virus.⁶ Many services and programs became virtual after the pandemic started. While telemedicine and virtual programming have been beneficial for many people, many older adults experienced barriers to accessing mental health and health care services and other supports.^{15,16,17}

■ **The digital divide has been exacerbated during the pandemic.** The [digital divide](#) is a term that refers to the gaps between people who have access to information and communication technologies (such as smartphones and reliable and affordable internet services) in their daily lives and those who do not.¹³ In general, older adults have less internet, mobile and device access when compared to younger people.^{14,50} Lack of access to the internet and digital literacy (the skills to navigate digital platforms) may be a barrier for some older adults when accessing online medical or social service appointments, searching for information about vaccines or registering for vaccination appointments.^{15,16,17,18}

■ **There have been negative impacts on those living with dementia and their caregivers.** Many people living with dementia have reported a change in symptoms, including difficulty concentrating, memory loss, agitation and restlessness.²⁸ The lack of social interaction as a result of

physical distancing measures may be a cause of this cognitive decline. Additionally, community programs that offer mental stimulation and social interaction (which are beneficial for cognitive functioning) were closed as a result of lockdown measures.^{6,12,30} Changes in programming can lead to changes in a person's daily routine.

■ **There was a risk of reduced physical activity.** At home exercises can be difficult for many people because of the lack of social support, encouragement and accountability.¹ Many community programs for older adults have a physical activity component included in order to maintain physical wellness and create an atmosphere of social encouragement and support.¹¹ However, the closure of in-person programs made it difficult to exercise in group settings. Additionally, public health measures early in the COVID-19 pandemic closed or limited access to public and/or green spaces. These measures made being physically active even more difficult for those adults that used these spaces to do so.¹²

■ **Older adults have experienced food insecurity or barriers to accessing food during the COVID-19 pandemic,** which can contribute to decreased mental and physical health.^{25,26} In 2017-2018, 6.8% of households with seniors' incomes as their main income source were food insecure. This is a lower prevalence than all other groups. However, the measures put in place to control COVID-19 have made accessing food difficult for some older adults.^{26,27} Local organizations that provide services for older adults suggest that older adults face various barriers to food access, depending on their circumstance, which extend beyond financial barriers. For example, older adults may not want to leave home during the pandemic, they may have difficulty accessing grocery stores during lockdown, they may not be aware of the service options available, or they can afford food, but not delivery.



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To adequately address growing needs in long-term care facilities, governments must ensure staffing and funding.

Long-term care and the impacts of COVID-19

Long-term care facilities have been highlighted as being particularly susceptible to COVID-19 exposure and outbreak. It can be difficult to contain outbreaks and ensure physical distancing if there is not adequate space, staffing or infection prevention and control training and infrastructure.³¹ Outbreaks in long-term care facilities also made it difficult to provide mental health care to residents, as many psychogeriatric staff that would previously visit to provide care were no longer able to be on site.⁶ Many residents also rely on their families to be active partners in their care. During periods of the pandemic where there was reduced family member access to long-term care facilities, there were reports of increased strain placed on long-term care staff.^{29,32,33}

Local Spotlight

Local service providers working with older adults have identified the following challenges:

- Local older adults expressed **difficulty going outside the home in winter months** during the pandemic due to falling and injury concerns. This led to increased feelings of isolation among these residents.
- **Increased feelings of isolation** among local older adults have been linked to an increase in the time required to do telephone check-ins, as older adults are using this time for social connection.
- Some service providers are concerned about **an increase in alcohol and substance use** among some older adults as a way to cope with the stresses of the pandemic.

Recommendations

As we move through the pandemic, it is critical that we learn from our experiences to inform proactive, current and future responses and actions that support the health and wellbeing of older adults.

- **Increase opportunities for older adults to meet in person to connect while following the most current COVID-19 guidelines.** This may include community programs to meet psychosocial and physical activity needs, bereavement groups, and religious groups.¹² Physical activity opportunities can be added to programs focused on other aspects of wellbeing. These activities could include exercise videos, virtual classes, or going for a walk outside; some seniors centres already offer these types of activities.³⁴
- **Increase investment in programs** that address the effects of loneliness, social isolation, and living alone on the mental health of older adults.^{1,3,4,5,6,8,9,10,25,38}
- **Governments must ensure staffing and funding to adequately address growing needs in the long-term care system.** The Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario wrote a report in June 2020 that summarizes staffing and funding recommendations for long-term care facilities from reports released in Ontario over the last 20 years.³⁷
- **Provide adequate, sustainable funding and training for infection prevention and control** for long-term care and retirement homes both now and after the pandemic.^{37,45}
- **Provide additional education on technology in order to improve digital literacy among older adults** and break down barriers to accessing supports and services, including navigating online systems to book vaccination appointments.¹⁷ Education could take the form of tutorial sessions in congregate settings to provide training on the use of electronic devices for accessing services.
- **Implement built environment modifications that increase safety and convenience of local outdoor activity spaces to make it easier for older adults to engage in physical activity,** such as sidewalk snow removal, increasing the number of trails, sidewalks, and parks and installing benches along trails to allow for breaks.^{35,36}
- **Address older adult food insecurity and barriers to accessing food** by providing resources that local food provision initiatives need to support older adults to easily access food.^{39,40} Food access barriers for older adults brought on by the pandemic can be addressed through multiple interventions that respond to the diverse needs of older adults, including offering free or low-cost food options, delivery and supports to navigate the various options that are available.^{41,42,43}

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Services and Supports

■ Crisis

If you are in crisis, call Here 24/7 at 1-844-437-3247**

You are not alone. Supports and services are ready to help you.

■ Mental Health

If you are struggling with your mental health or if you know someone who is struggling, there are mental health supports available to you.

Contact your primary care provider or call Compass Community Services:

■ Distress line at 1-888-821-3760 or 519-821-3760

■ Virtual Mental Health Clinics at 519-824-2431 or 1-800-307-7078 to make an appointment. No referral required.

■ Walk-in Mental Health Clinic at:

- **Shelldale site** (20 Shelldale Crescent, Guelph ON) on Wednesdays between 1 p.m. and 7 p.m.
- **Fergus site** (900 Tower Street South, Fergus ON) on Thursdays between 1 p.m. and 7 p.m.

■ Social Connection

If you would like to receive a daily call from a trained volunteer for social connection, please call Compass Community Services at 519-824-2431 extension 27 to register.

■ Local Resources

If you or an older adult you know is struggling, please visit the following for a list of local resources:

■ [Toward Common Ground](#)

■ [Wellington-Dufferin-Guelph Public Health Community Support](#)

■ Seniors Association

If you are looking to find ways to be active and engaged in your community, contact the Guelph Wellington Seniors Association (GWSA) at gwsa-guelph.ca or call 519-823-1291 (for people age 55 years and older).

Due to current restrictions, some in-person activities and programs may be cancelled. Please call or check websites for up-to-date information.

Footnotes and references are available at [Toward Common Ground](#).

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Note: There are limitations associated with the data and research sources included in this Vital Focus. For more information about sources and citations, please go to [Toward Common Ground](#). If you know of research or data about diverse communities not represented in this Vital Focus, please contact us at sarahh@towardcommonground.ca