

The impact of COVID-19 to date on older people's mental and physical health



Introduction

This study reinforces what Age UK has been frequently hearing from older people during the last six months: that many are deeply afraid of COVID-19 - and understandably so. As a result, even though the number of COVID cases reduced over the summer, a significant proportion of older people still stayed at or close to home. Now that cases are rising again they will be all the more cautious.

If you are an older person, staying at home may help to protect you from the virus but, as this report shows, it can lead to other serious problems: for example, loss of function - mobility and balance especially as a result of moving around less; pain from untreated medical conditions that will often have got worse these last few months; and the psychological impact of living with so much stress, uncertainty and isolation, leading to increased loneliness among other problems.

Sadly, taken together these findings paint a picture of a substantial group of older people who have been left frightened, depressed and very much alone. Some said they could no longer take pleasure in the things they used to enjoy, and with no end yet in sight to the pandemic they found it hard to have hope for the future. Others were acutely conscious that time is not on their side. When life returns to some normality they thought it might be too late for them, those with serious health conditions especially.

Older people are typically extremely resilient and self-sufficient but COVID-19 and our policy responses to it pose them with unique challenges. This research was carried out in the summer. With winter fast approaching, how are these older people feeling now, and how much worse will they feel in two-or three-months' time as the weather gets colder and the nights draw in?

That is why this study is a wake-up call for us all. Older people, those on their own especially, are going to need our support more than ever this winter to help them get through. But it is also a call to action for policymakers too. Ministers need to resist the ageist siren calls to shut older people away and let the virus rip. Getting test and trace working properly is surely the only way of overcoming the dual threats to our health and our economy, and that's where Government should focus its attention.

**Caroline Abrahams,
Charity Director, Age UK**

Who have we spoken to?

To understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on older people's physical and mental health we consulted with older people, their friends, families, and loved ones.

Our research was made up of:

A survey promoted across the Age UK social media channels for two weeks in August 2020. The survey was completed by 569 people- 369 respondents were older people themselves and 200 answered on behalf of an older person. Over half of respondents were over the age of 70. Of the older people we spoke to who told us their sex, 278 were female and 78 were male.

Representative online polling of 1,364 people over the age of 60, conducted by Kantar Polling in September 2020. Of the people polled, nearly half were over the age of 70 and 40% were already living with a long-term condition before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic¹.

This briefing presents our findings on the impact of the pandemic on older people's physical and mental health. Our research also explored how the pandemic is impacting on older people's access to social care and to the NHS. We will be publishing these findings shortly in a separate briefing.

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1. Research Express provides quick, reliable market research. Research Express is part of Kantar UK Ltd. The survey was conducted on the Research Express Online Omnibus amongst 1364 UK adults aged 60+ from 20th August – 3rd September 2020.

Physical health

While some older people have used the last few months as an opportunity to do more exercise and improve their fitness, our research suggests that many have seen their health deteriorate in the face of isolation and reduced opportunities to socialise and be physically active – sometimes drastically so.

Mobility and movement

As geriatricians predicted would occur, being closeted away at home for long periods has left significant numbers of older people with reduced mobility and experiencing deconditioning, muscle weakness, and joint pain. Day-to-day activities, such as going upstairs or washing, have suddenly become difficult, and previously independent older people have become reliant on walking aids to move short distances, which they used to managed with ease. Reduced mobility has a knock-on effect, and older people told us that they had put on weight, were experiencing joint and muscle pain, and feeling consistently low.

We asked older people how their health has changed since the start of the pandemic:

- One in three have less energy
- One in four older people are unable to walk as far as before
- One in five feel less steady on their feetⁱ

“Mum used to catch buses to the next town and walk across town and back home on the bus. Now she is struggling to walk down the path.”

(Family member of female, 85-89)

“Reduced exercise has led to weight gain, increased blood pressure and unstable blood sugar.”

(Male, 65-69)

“Having already had health problems, it’s been accelerated and have lethargy, no strength and walking problem. As I was fine before, feel life has been cut short.”

(Female, 70-74)

“Loss of mobility during house arrest. Unable to take daily walks.”

(Male, 85-89)

“Dependence on walking devices is now complete - this worries her as she is losing any hope that she will ever be able to walk without support again. Her reclining chair - which was chosen especially to fit her - is the only chair she can sit in comfortably now, possibly because she has so rarely used anything else for the last few months, and sitting upright is a problem. I fear her back is losing strength”

(Family member of female, 75-79)ⁱⁱ

Diet and malnutrition

Low mood, lack of support for meal preparation, deteriorating physical health, and increased pain has impacted on some older people's appetite and diet. We heard from friends and family who were concerned that their loved ones had stopped eating or drinking and were losing weight. Older people themselves told us they had lost interest in food and had stopped eating enough.

- Of the older people we polled who already had difficulty preparing food before lockdown, more than one in three (35%)² reported that this was now more difficult to doⁱⁱⁱ.

“Dementia has deteriorated considerably in lockdown. We have not been able to visit her in her flat to help with reminders about eating, sort out cupboards and help with meal prep. She has lost weight.”

(Family member of female, 85-89)

“Dementia has accelerated. Now 95% liquid diet, whereas before he would eat sandwiches, meals, crisps, cake, biscuits. Now nothing!”

(Partner of male, 70-74)

“When she's really low she loses interest in the things she used to do for fun. She also struggles to eat and loses her appetite which is quite dangerous for her as she has a slim, delicate frame.”

(Friend of female, 75-79)

“Lost weight and struggling to eat due to severe COPD, but mental health affected this too as daughter could not visit due to shielding and mental health day centre closed”

(On behalf of female, 70-74)

“Mobility decreased which had an effect on pain and caused her to stop eating.”

(Family member of female, 75-79)^{iv}

2. Please note, the base for this statistic is based on a sample of fewer than 100 people (89).

New and emerging cognitive decline

Some friends and families of older people reported that lack of mental stimulation and socialising throughout the pandemic has left their loved ones more forgetful, confused, and repeating the same conversations. Older people themselves sometimes told us they were finding it harder to remember things.

- One in five older people agreed that since the start of lockdown, they are finding it harder to remember things^v

“More forgetful, rambling speech, bringing up memories no one has heard before”

(Family member of female, 80-84)

“Lack of visitors and loss of library large print books has all contributed to deterioration in mental sharpness”

(Family member of female, 80-84)

“She’s got more confused as she was not allowed her routine of going to the shops and she could not see all of her family members.”

(Family member of female, 75-79)^{vi}

Older people affected by dementia

Over the course of lockdown older people living with dementia have been significantly impacted by the sudden changes to routine, access to services, and reduced ability to maintain regular contact with family and friends. Carers, families, and friends of people living with dementia have told us that they have seen rapid deterioration in their loved one's cognitive function, which has affected memory, sleep, mood, and behaviour. They explained how hard it has been to help someone with dementia to understand why they cannot do the things they enjoy or see the people they love. A survey conducted by Alzheimer's Society with people living with dementia found similar findings, with 82% of people affected by dementia reporting an increase in dementia symptoms during lockdown, including memory loss, difficulty concentrating, and agitation or restlessness^{vii}.

“She’s in a care home and has dementia and gets so upset when we can’t go near her and we just can’t get her to understand why”

(Family member of female, 85-89)

“My Dad was admitted to hospital following internal bleeding. Being in hospital with dementia alone with no visitors and not understanding where he was or where we were has really traumatised him. Dad’s dementia has been much worse since the hospital stay. He can’t understand that home is home and wakes in the night several times confused and/or getting dressed. He always used to sleep at night really well. The hospital stay on his own with no visitors has 100% changed Dad and it must be awful for him trying to make sense of everything now.”

(Family member of male, 85-89)

“My mum has dementia and she is in a care home which I visited daily. She could not understand why we couldn’t see her. She gets quite sad and her health deteriorated causing her to fall.”

(Family member of female, 95-99)

“The dementia has got worse as lockdown stopped the centre she attended 5 days a week.”

(Family member of female, 85-89)

“Two months into the pandemic she became more confused. Started to leave her home alone. Wandering the streets day and night. I couldn’t keep her safe at home even with help from carers. She had to move into a care home. And she hasn’t seen her family since that day, no visiting allowed yet.

(Family member of female, 85-89)^{viii}

Older people with long-term health conditions and those asked to shield

Those with pre-existing health conditions (particularly those advised to 'shield') have been some of the hardest hit by the pandemic. Although restrictions were placed on all our lives, people who are classed as clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) were advised not to leave the house at all. Even those people who weren't advised to shield, but were living with long-term conditions, often took additional precautions which have clearly taken their toll.

Not only have older people with long-term health conditions had reduced access to their usual healthcare, they have had their coping methods, such as physical exercise, support groups, or even day-to-day routines, disrupted. On top of this, the stress and anxiety caused by the COVID-19

pandemic has often had a knock-on effect on their long-term health conditions. As a result, our research suggests that many have been struggling to manage their conditions, with worsening symptoms, reduced ability to complete day-to-day activities and an increase in pain.

“Lack of usual exercise has made Osteoporosis worse, so suffered a fractured vertebra.”

(Female, aged 70-74)

“I have not been able to access my local swimming pool which is a huge help in maintaining my mobility and managing my weight. I have not been able to fully access support from the weight management group I am a member of and because of this I have gained weight which makes it more likely that my joint replacement surgery will be further delayed”

(Female, 60-64)

“Stress and anxiety always make my ME/CFS symptoms worse - and anxiety over reduced support at home and family member health hasn't helped.”

(Female, 70-74)

“Arthritis knee got worse as have been unable to swim.”

(Female, 80-84)

“Put weight on due to lack of exercise and affected arthritis.”

(Male, 65-69)

“My Meniere's disease has been worse, I often feel sick, because of stress and anxiety.”

(Female, 75-79)^{ix}

Older people with long-term health conditions and those asked to shield

Older people living with long-term health conditions are more likely to report seeing a decline in their health:

- 33% of older people living with long-term health conditions report feeling less steady on their feet, compared to 8% of those without
- 43% of people with a long-term health condition are unable to walk as far as before, compared to 13% of people without a long-term health condition
- 24% of people with a long-term health condition say they are now less independent, compared to 8% of those without a long-term health condition
- 28% of people with a long-term health condition say they are finding it harder to remember things, compared to 12% of those without^x

We also heard:

We asked older people who were already struggling with activities of daily living before the pandemic how their ability to do these activities had changed since the start of the pandemic:

- Two in five (39%) are finding it harder to walk short distances
- Two in five (41%) are finding it harder to clean/tidy their house
- One in three (33%) are finding it harder to walk up and down the stairs^{xi}

Mental health and emotional well-being

The COVID-19 pandemic has taken its toll on older people's mental health. Older people with pre-existing mental health conditions have seen an increase in the severity of their symptoms, while others are struggling for the first time.

Anxiety

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased anxiety, with older people telling us they are worried about contracting COVID-19, about the wellbeing and safety of their family, and about the future. For some older people, the anxiety has been debilitating, leading to panic attacks and physical symptoms which are having a profound impact on their day-to-day lives.

One in three (34%) older people agree that their anxiety is now worse or much worse than before the start of the pandemic⁴.

“Due to the stress and anxiety I have experienced severe headaches and migraine type attacks of flashing light in the eyes. Also frightened to go to hospital when offered when I felt extremely anxious on one occasion.”

(Male, 70-74)

“Anxiety attacks, last experienced over 20 years ago, returned once strict lockdown was lifted.”

(Female, 70-74)

“Had no support at all, my anxiety is off the scale, my OCD is worse. I have been out once since early March, having no family made it worse”

(Female, 65-69)

“Lack of sleep and general anxiety knock one sideways.”

(Male, 65-69)

“I’m sleeping less well than ever and at times have felt crippled by anxiety.”

(Female, 70-74)

“I thought I would be ok as I am quite a solitary person anyway, but I find I’m having huge mood swings, and almost panic attacks for no apparent reason. My blood pressure feels high and many mornings I wake with my heart racing and a thumping headache”

(Female, 70-74)^{xii}

COVID-19 related anxiety

Older people have clearly heard the messages about their increased vulnerability to COVID-19 and many are now very anxious about leaving the house. We heard that older people are worried the public aren't following the guidelines and are scared that they will contract COVID-19 and become seriously ill or die. Many face a double-edged sword where they are afraid of leaving the house but at the same time cannot cope with the loneliness and isolation at home.

- In the last 7 days, 37% of people over the age of 70 have not left their home at all or have only left for work, exercise, basic needs, or health reasons. Meanwhile, 1 in 20 people aged over 70 have not left their home at all.
- 31% of people 70 say they feel unsafe or very unsafe when outside of their home due to the pandemic.
- 45% of people aged 70+ say that they are either uncomfortable or very uncomfortable leaving their house because of the coronavirus pandemic^{xiii}

“I feel trapped and deserted as no visitors plus it's no use going anywhere because it's too risky. Last time I went out to the bank a young woman coughed in my face! I worried for 14 days after in case she had the virus and I felt quite ill and panicky.”

(Female, 75-79)

“Covid has made me into a hermit afraid to go out and when I do I just want to get things done and get back home again to the safety of my home.”

(Male, 65-69)

“ I just feel so scared to go out, my depression has a knock on effect on my pain, not being able to go outside means my mind keeps going round in circles making me more depressed. No conversations, no laughter, in debt and overweight from takeaways, I feel unloved and unwanted.”

(Female, 55-59)

“More fearful. More aware of one's own mortality”

(Male, 70-74)

“Not shielded but I consider myself very vulnerable ..so isolation is difficult...don't want to risk leaving the house.”

(Male, 75-59)^{xiv}

Low mood and depression

Some older people told us that they are feeling down, have lost pleasure and purpose in their lives, and feel as if every day is the same. We were sometimes told that there is nothing for them to look forward to and sadly a proportion even questioned whether their life is worth living.

“I wake up in the morning, just another day, unable to go out or have visitors, feel like a prisoner in my own home. Nothing to look forward to.”

(Male, 75-59)

“Every day trying to find something to do to stop boredom. Sometimes wish I could go to sleep and not wake up.”

(Female, 65-69)

“Has made me more on edge, and alone, I go shopping once a week and that’s my only time out, usually my garden is all painted and pruned but I have done nothing. Feel I have no purpose, no energy, just don’t want to be here.”

(Female, 60-64)

“She has lost motivation and mainly spends her time sitting alone at home. She has also only been in contact with 3 people, mainly on the phone, since March and this has caused a massive deterioration in her mental health. She has recently talked about wanting to kill herself.”

(Family member of older female, 80-84)^{xv}

“It has made me feel that I would like to get off this bus at times and that feeling is quite foreign to me”

(Female, 80-84)

- The proportion of over 70s experiencing depression has doubled since the start of the pandemic^{xvi}
- More than one in three over 60s (36%) say they are feeling less motivated to do the things they used to enjoy^{xvii}.

Worry about the future

Some older people are worried about what the future holds and fear that their lives will never be the same again. They are scared about the prospect of a second wave and lockdown, particularly if this takes place in the winter months. Looking forward, many older people expect their quality of life to be diminished, with two in five of the people we surveyed saying they anticipate their quality of life to be poor or very poor in the next six months ^{xviii}.

“I am frightened and feel my life will never be the same and fear for all my family”

(Female, 85-89)

“I feel that this is never going to end. I don’t feel safe at all, feel very vulnerable and scared”

(Female, 65-69)

“It has made me rather fearful for the future for my family and society. Dealing with a possible second wave during the winter months will be more challenging and I think it will be hard to remain positive for much of the time. A strict lockdown with no contact again does worry me”

(Female, 75-79)

“My main concern, like that of many elderly people, is that the situation will deteriorate. Health tests, already past the date for review, will not be given priority as they are deemed ‘non-urgent’

(Female, 75-79)^{xiv}

Many older people cannot see an end to the COVID-19 pandemic.

- 25% of people over 70 are unsure when their lives will return to normal
- 31% think it will take over a year for their lives to return to normal
- 9% don’t think their lives will ever return to normal^{xx}

Self-neglect

We heard from older people, and their friends and family, that low mood was in some cases leading to self-neglect, with older people not washing, taking care of their appearance, eating, going outside, or cleaning their house. For many of these older people this was completely out of character.

“She has become a completely different person. I don’t see that she will ever get her old life back. She looks unrecognisable - has lost motivation to wash, do her hair.”

(Family member of older female, 80-84)

“I just sit, I know I should get up every now and again due to other health reasons. I go days without showering, lost all energy to self-care”

(Female, 65-69)

“Feel really down a lot and can’t always be bothered to get dressed and go out.”

(Female, 70-74)

“Staring at the same four walls and a similar daily routine. Failing to engage in daily household activities, washing up and hoovering etc., even though they are able”

(Family member of female, 80-84)

“Difficulty in dealing with everyday challenges. Negative attitude. Angry and impatient with others. Expresses suicidal thoughts. Lack of pride in appearance”

(Family member of female, 75-79)

“They have become very isolated, bored, now sleeping all the time and lacking interest in activities in the home that they used to enjoy. Very difficult to get them to stay awake to eat and drink.”

(Answering on behalf of female, 65-69)

“This lady who lives alone and has been isolated since March has lost the will to live and has stopped eating”

(Family member of female, 85-89)^{xxi}

Bereavement

Older people who have lost a loved one during the pandemic explained how traumatic and distressing this experience has been. Not only were they unable to say goodbye but, due to lockdown, were left grieving by themselves without support. This was made harder by the fact that in many cases their loved ones died unexpectedly or in traumatic circumstances, because of COVID-19.

Older people who lost a loved one before the pandemic, and may have previously been coping, also found that their grief was compounded by the lockdown and the stress of the situation. For some older people spending time with family and friends and trying to keep busy had been

important in helping them to come to terms with their loss. When they were unable to do this anymore, they were left dwelling on the bereavement and reliving their grief. This was especially difficult for those who live alone and have had no distractions to help them get through.

“He was already quite lonely after my nan died and worked hard to forge new friendships at 89. He then had these friendships completely removed from him during the pandemic and was therefore left very isolated. Family weren’t able to visit and at 92 he isn’t using the internet or interested in learning, so he didn’t see me (his granddaughter) for months. He also did not meet his great grandson until he was 5 months old which really, really got him down. He has stopped eating and believes it may be physical, but I have a feeling that he is now suffering from deep depression”

(Family member of male, 90-94)

“The fact that all usual activities show no sign of restarting added to the trauma of my mother dying in care home at peak of pandemic...did not see her for the last 5 weeks of her life.”

(Female, 65-69)

“Because of the stress and anxiety, I have been experiencing PTS about my late son. I have had to put his pictures away from my view, my husband has been anxious”

(Female, 75-79)

“Just feel like nothing matters anymore. An email friend died of the virus early on and within days and without any family with him. Hard to get over that alone.”

(Female, 60-64)

“I went backwards mentally from worry and post-traumatic stress became a lot worse after trying to heal from it after the experience of watching loved ones die slowly.”

(Female, 60-64)

“I am now on anxiety tablets, due to losing my husband to the COVID-19. Seeing what he went through was heart-breaking”

(Female, 65-69)^{xxii}

Loss of confidence

Following months of staying inside, some older people have lost confidence in completing day-to-day activities which were previously completely normal and routine for them. Our research suggests that understandably, older people have lost confidence in going out to busy places or areas where they may be at higher risk of contracting COVID-19. Worryingly, some are even feeling less confident about leaving their home or seeing their family.

Friends and family of older people also highlighted how their loved ones felt less able to do the things they used to enjoy and had become increasingly dependent on support from others.

“I have found that being told what to do and where to go makes me feel older and therefore question if I should be as active as I was previously. Which in turn just makes staying fit and well harder to maintain”

(Male, 70-74)

“Partner has Parkinson’s disease... COVID-19 and lockdown has destroyed any confidence he has and he’s now unsure both on mobility and self-confidence.”

(Male, 75-79)

“Because she stopped being able to use public transport or leave the house, she has not walked outside the house since March. Now she has lost a lot of confidence and muscle / strength and can hardly walk. I suspect she will never recover her strength or be able to resume her previous activities.”

(Family member of female, 85-89)

“It’s sad to see how much lockdown has drained her confidence - gone from someone who attended regular groups out daily - to someone who is scared to go over her doorstep. Complete lack of confidence in their ability to cope with day to day tasks and everyday living.”

(Family member of female, 80-84)

“It has 100% changed him. His confidence. His dietary requirements. His ability to function without worry. Stolen his freedom and life.”

(Partner of male, 70-74)^{xxiii}

Loss of confidence

We asked older people how their confidence to do different activities had changed since the start of the lockdown. We found:

- Two in three (64%) are less confident using public transport
- Half (47%) are less confident going to a hospital
- Two in five (43%) are less confident going to the shops
- Two in five (40%) are less confident going to a GP surgery
- One in five (17%) are less confident leaving the house by themselves
- One in five (18%) are less confident going for short walks outside^{xxiv}

Loneliness

Clubs, activities, and volunteering, which older people previously were involved with have been put on hold, while friends and family have needed to stay away, leaving many older people feeling lonely and isolated. While many of us have moved our lives online, there are four million people over the age of 65 who have never used the internet^{xxv} and as such are unable to video chat with friends or family. We heard from older people who said they had spent days without speaking to anyone and were left feeling unloved, unwanted, and forgotten. Many older people had also missed key milestones, such as birthdays or anniversaries, and were worried that their relationships with family members, such as grandchildren, would suffer. Being separated from friends and family has been especially distressing for those who are reaching the end of their life and fear they will spend their last months away from their loved ones.

“Feel lost at times without human contact. Used to be very active with various committees but without Zoom and all the other modern technology not in the loop”

(Male, 70-74)

“I have cancer and having to be shielded is so difficult. I also live alone and to get up day after day knowing you can’t see the people who love you is extremely hard. Knowing you don’t get to laugh and make a joke on your own is no fun. I didn’t see my son for nearly 4 months and still haven’t seen his children. These might be my last summer days or my last year of life and I can’t do any of the things that make me happy”

(Female, 70-74)

“No company... trapped indoors.... thinks he’s been deserted, and no one cares about him”

(Family member of male, 90-94)

“Living on your own without a garden or outside space has been extremely difficult. I wouldn’t wish it on anyone! Phone call once a week feels pretty awful to be honest! No, this has been a rotten time for me! I am badly affected by this”

(Female, 75-79)

“All my social activities and holidays ceased suddenly and had no contact with anyone for the past 5 months. It has been a very dramatic change in everyday life, not for the better”

(Male, 75-79)

“Although I have a husband & family I am so alone. I sit and cry for no reason. My mood is so low as I feel so isolated. I am now taking pills for pain & low mood.”

(Female, 65-69)

Health inequalities

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing health inequalities and there are differences among older people in how the pandemic has been experienced. Older people from more disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds have been more severely affected, both mentally and physically. Older people told us that their personal circumstances, such as not having a garden or space or experiencing financial worries on top of the pandemic, were making their experience of lockdown much more challenging. This was reflected within our polling where older people from more disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds had seen a greater decline in their health than more advantaged older people.

Older people from more disadvantaged social grades reported being worse affected³:

- 41% of people from more disadvantaged social grades say they feel less motivated to do the things they used to enjoy compared to 30% of those from the most advantaged
- 39% of people from more disadvantaged social grades say they have less energy compared to 26% of those from the most advantaged
- 22% of people from more disadvantaged social grades say they feel less steady on their feet compared to 14% from the most advantaged^{xxvi}

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3. We defined social grade by asking respondents which group the chief income earner in their household belongs to: semi or unskilled manual worker; skilled manual worker; Supervisory or clerical/ Junior managerial/ Professional/ administrator; Intermediate managerial/ Professional/ Administrative; Higher managerial/ Professional; Student; Retired and living on state pension only; Unemployed (for over 6 months) or not working due to long term sickness. If the chief income earner is retired and in receipt of an occupational pension, respondents were asked to state what group they belonged to based on the income earner's previous occupation. When referring to the most advantaged grades we mean grades ABC1 and by the most disadvantaged we mean grades C2DE.

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