

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on older people's health: one year on



Methodology

- Online survey promoted through Age UK networks (Jan - Feb 2021)
 - 14,840 responses (incl. 13,189 older people & 1,651 family/informal carers)
 - 90% of respondents aged 65+ and 74% aged over 70
 - 62% reported at least one long term condition
 - 25% had been advised to shield
- Representative online poll older people (Kantar. Jan – Feb 2021)
 - All respondents aged 60+ with nearly half over the age of 70
 - 40% reported at least one long term condition
 - 17% had been advised by the NHS they were ‘extremely clinically vulnerable’

The themes identified and issues raised closely align to what we heard through our telephone services and in written communication throughout.



Many older people have struggled to stay active

28% of older people disagree that they have been able to keep fit during the pandemic.

- Limited opportunities to exercise
- Anxiety about leaving the house
- Caring responsibilities
- Long-term health conditions
- Lost motivation

‘Unable to get out for exercise as I need help walking and social distancing prevented that.’

‘Lack of exercise because I cannot leave my husband on his own. He has both vascular dementia and Alzheimer’s. This had advanced a lot during lockdown.’

‘I have put on weight and exercise less and have lost my motivation to do anything about it.’



Reduced mobility and fitness

- Lack of physical activity has reduced older people's mobility and fitness
- They report feeling breathless, gaining weight, and experiencing aches and pains
- Older people are struggling to walk short distances and some have become dependent on aids

"My mobility had deteriorated badly. I can walk to my gate but that's all. Even a small amount of effort leaves me breathless"

"Because I was forced to isolate, I got far less exercise and now find that my fitness and energy levels are very low. I worry that in the future I will be unable to get back to the way I was previously"



Balance and falls

- 17% of older people (around 2.7 million) agree they are less steady on their feet since the start of the pandemic.
- Older people report falling more frequently than before
- This is impacting on confidence, with older people saying they are too anxious to go outside.

“I have become wobbly and have fallen several times hurting my ribs on two occasions and my thigh on another occasion and I have hit my head on numerous occasions.”

“My balance is getting worse. I need to walk to keep active but I'm bothered about having a fall.”



Reduced ability to do activities of daily living

- Older people who already struggled with activities of daily living say they are now more difficult
 - **Almost half of older people who say they already found it hard to clean their house say this is more difficult**
 - **42% who found it hard to get up and down the stairs say this is harder**
- A new cohort of older people are experiencing difficulties with ADLs for the first time

“Since last year, I noticed it's harder to climb stairs and just go into the next room w/o having to catch my breath.”

“Haven't moved out of the house for months on end. Can't even make it up the stairs now (previously no problem at all).”

"I have gradually gone backwards in general health. It takes me much longer to do simple things like shower, shaving and general jobs around the home."



Many older people are living in significant pain

- Stress, a reduction in healthcare services, and a reduced ability to use pain management techniques (e.g. swimming and exercise) has left some older people in constant agony
- This is having a knock-on effect on older people's mental health

"My fibromyalgia is in "flare up" and has been since my Brother went into hospital in August. After his death it has been even worse. I "hurt" everywhere! It is like walking around with every muscle in my body "cramping". I don't know what I am saying half the time, I am shaking so much I can't hold things properly."

"My pain has got a lot worse. I am in my chair 24/7. Some days I don't eat as in too much pain to be able to get up and make a meal. Virtually only get up when I need to go to the toilet."



People have experienced a stark deterioration in their pre-existing health conditions

- Older people living with LTCs have been unable to attend normal appointments, have tests, or receive treatment
- On top of this the coping mechanisms and support they usually have in place have been taken from them
- This has left them in worsening pain and experiencing more severe symptoms. For some older people the progression of their condition cannot be reversed.
- **18% of older people with LTCs say they find it harder to look after themselves**

"I used to swim every day which helps dramatically with arthritis. Am now crippled and need two new knees. Don't know how this helps the NHS. Certainly doesn't help me."

"I have liver and kidney disease which I was getting treatment for, but it has now stopped. I now find it difficult to eat, walk, breathe or sleep."

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Long Covid

- Older people who have contracted Covid told us about the enduring symptoms they have experienced
- Those living with long-term health conditions explained that their conditions have deteriorated
- Relatives of older people with dementia reported accelerated cognitive decline

“He contracted Covid-19 and was taken into hospital. Since recovering he has suffered lots of pain, brain fog, got very depressed.”

“Since catching Covid-19, they are not the same person, health wise as before. They now struggle to even walk small distances, daily selfcare is a lot worse, and anger/mood problems now bad.”



Older carers

- Older carers have taken on increased caring responsibilities and lost respite support.
- They report feeling exhausted and at breaking point
- Many have deprioritised their own physical and mental health during this time

“I am the sole 24/7 full time carer for my husband who has Alzheimer’s and is incontinent. I have had no help in looking after my husband. I have to get up at least twice every night and I am exhausted. My rheumatoid arthritis is much more painful and my left foot and ankle have become agony all the time so severely limiting my mobility.”

“I have more carer responsibilities with the added difficulties of trying to sort out hospital and GP problems. I do not have the time or energy to look after myself properly.”



Health inequalities

- Older people from lower socioeconomic groups have been worse hit
- Pre-existing long-term conditions, financial concerns, poor-quality housing and lack of access to outside space have exacerbated the impact of the pandemic
- More likely to report that they are living in increased pain, are finding it harder to remember things, and that they cannot walk as far.

“The environment in which I live is not conducive to exercise. There’s only so much moving around in a cramped flat.”

“Have lost a bit of weight as only able to afford to eat one meal a day.”

“Banned from going out so losing mobility. Not eating and can’t afford any heating or lighting so health is deteriorating.”

