

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



# Methodology

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- 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

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**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

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- 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

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- 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

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- 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

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- 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

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- 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

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- 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

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- 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

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- 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.”*

