

During the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic, older adults left home predominantly for physical exercise

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Physical exercise was the most common reason to leave home during the first wave of the pandemic in 2020. Credit: University of Jyväskylä

In spring 2020, when the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic hit Finland, older adults drastically reduced their out-of-home activities. During the period of government restrictions, physical exercise was the most common reason to leave home, a recent study at the University of Jyväskylä Faculty of Sport and Health Sciences finds.

"In [spring](#) 2020, it was feared that the closure of many activity destinations and the recommendations to avoid close contact with persons from other households put in place by the government would decrease physical activity levels, and thus, negatively affect [older adults'](#) physical functional capacity," Senior Researcher Erja Portegijs explains. "According to our research results, this was however, not the case."

Throughout the restriction period, physical exercise and walking outdoors, for example, in nature was possible, and even encouraged by the government later in the spring.

"This study shows that [physical exercise](#) was the most common reason to go out," Portegijs adds. "Otherwise, older participants had few reasons to go out beyond grocery shopping during the first spring of the pandemic."

Previous research shows that all activities outside of one's home are beneficial for physical activity. As the reasons to leave home were markedly limited during the first spring of the pandemic, more research is needed to determine the long-term effects on mobility and maintaining functional capacity.

"This research is unique, even though it was based on the data of 44 participants only," Portegijs says. "Previously, we did not know where older adults moved and for what reason. Studying where people go to is possible using a map-based questionnaire. This is one of the first studies utilizing such a questionnaire among older adults."

As coronavirus-related measures have varied significantly between countries, it is not sure whether these results are generalizable to other countries. In Finland, curfews were not implemented and governmental restrictions were mostly based on recommendations rather than enforced regulations.

In 2017 and 2018, a map-based questionnaire was used to collect data on frequently visited activity destinations as part of the larger AGNES study among 75-, 80-, and 85-year-old adults living in Jyväskylä city in Central Finland. In May and June 2020, participants were invited to complete the map-based questionnaire following a postal [questionnaire](#). Only a small portion of participants was able to use [digital devices](#) independently and thus to participate. These participants had somewhat better health and function than the others.

"As abilities to use digital devices improve among the aging population, the relevance of map-based research methods will further increase," Portegijs says.

More information: Erja Portegijs et al. Older adults' activity destinations before and during COVID-19 restrictions: From a variety of activities to mostly physical exercise close to home, *Health & Place* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.healthplace.2021.102533](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2021.102533)

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