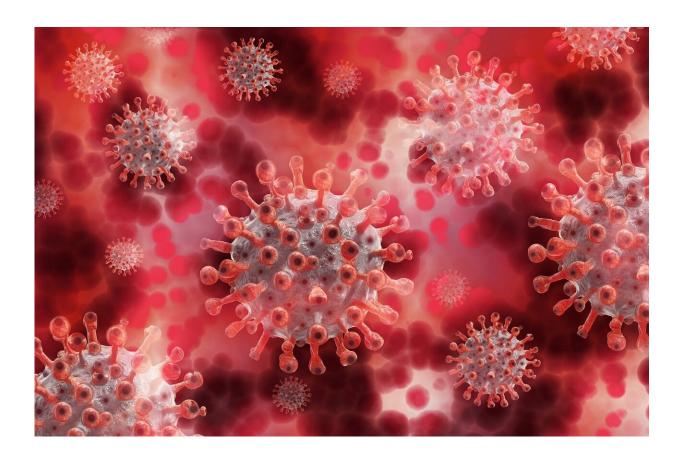# COVID-19 is a 'serious risk' to 80% of older Australians

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Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

At least 80% of Australians aged over 70 years are at high risk of serious illness or death if they contract COVID-19, according to a new study led by the University of South Australia.

People with high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes and cancer are more vulnerable to poor outcomes if they contract COVID-19 and having more than one of these conditions increases the risks.

The study, published in the Australian Journal of General Practice, involved 103,422 Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) clients. It revealed that more than 80% had at least one risk factor for COVID-19, half of them had two risk factors, and 20% had more than three risk factors, including immune-related diseases and diabetes.

Of the older Australians living in the community—who comprised 88% of the study participants—the most common condition was high blood pressure followed by heart disease. Those living in residential aged care (RAC), had slightly lower rates of high blood pressure but had higher rates of heart disease, respiratory conditions, and kidney disease.

Lead author Associate Professor Nicole Pratt, Deputy Director of the Quality Use of Medicines and Pharmacy Research Centre at UniSA, says the findings align with evidence from other countries where patients have been admitted to hospital with COVID-19.

"In the US for example, 70% of older patients admitted for COVID-19 in the past year had high blood pressure, 43% had diabetes and 29% suffered from cardiopulmonary diseases," Assoc Prof Pratt says.

"A quarter of the older Australians that we studied live with an autoimmunity condition like cancer or may be taking medicines that suppress their immune systems and one in five has diabetes. These conditions carry a far higher risk for COVID-19 than some other conditions."

The latest statistics released by the Federal Government show that of the 904 Australians who have died of COVID-19, 94% of them are aged 70

years and older.

Since the study was completed, the Government has started rolling out the Pfizer and AstraZeneca vaccines to Australia's most vulnerable and frontline workers, including 30,000 aged care residents and staff across the country.

"Our findings highlight the urgent need for older Australians to get vaccinated as soon as they are eligible," Assoc Prof Pratt says.

  More information: NL Pratt et al. Prevalence of multiple risk factors for poor outcomes associated with COVID-19 among an elderly Australian population, *Australian Journal of General Practice* (2021). DOI: 10.31128/AJGP-07-20-5546 Candy Gibson

Provided by University of South Australia