

How the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the lifestyle and behaviors of older adults at risk of dementia

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Professor Miia Kivipelto. Credit: Erik Cronberg

How have social distancing and quarantine measures affected older individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic? Recent research lead by

Professor Miia Kivipelto's team provides some important insights—there were several negative effects but at the same time many lifestyles and behaviors did not substantially change during the first wave of the pandemic, and some even improved.

The study evaluated a population of Finnish [older persons](#) who have increased risk of developing or have [cognitive impairment](#) ([Finnish Geriatric Intervention Study to Prevent Cognitive Impairment and Disability—FINGER trial](#)). A postal survey was sent in June 2020 to 859 FINGER participants. By September 2020, 613 (71%) participants responded. Mean age of the participants was 78 years, 32% lived alone, and 80% had at least one chronic condition. The majority (three quarters) adopted some distancing practices during the first months of the pandemic. Several pandemic-related changes were reported in lifestyle and health, for example:

- 34% reported a decrease in physical activity.
- Many individuals had less contact with friends (55%) and family (31%).
- 21% reported more feelings of loneliness.
- 15% felt that their memory had been getting worse during the pandemic.
- Older people and those living alone were more susceptible to negative changes.
- Cancellations in dental healthcare (43%), home aid (30%), and rehabilitative services (53%) were common.

On the positive side:

- Many individuals were able to use [digital tools](#) to keep in contact with family and friends.
- A large proportion of people were able to keep up healthy eating habits (with many increasing their vegetable and fruit

consumption) and in general their self-rated health and quality of life remained stable.

"As the pandemic is ongoing, it is important to identify factors that may help older individuals to maintain [healthy lifestyles](#) during lockdowns and quarantine and to follow-up these individuals to see how they are coping with the 2nd wave of the pandemic. Can we identify individuals who need more support during the pandemic, such as those living alone, to target them for interventions to support them?" says Miia Kivipelto, the principal investigator of the FINGER trial and the scientific leader of the World-Wide FINGERS network (WW-FINGERS). "Research into changes in lifestyle risk factors as a result of the pandemic is important because these [risk factors](#) are relevant for brain health and for several chronic diseases and can also play a role in viral infections," she adds.

"It will be interesting to compare our results with the 30 countries who are working together in the WW-FINGERS network. We are using a common methodology to evaluate how the [pandemic](#) is affecting the older population in different cultural and economic settings through the WW-FINGERS SARS-CoV-2 initiative," says Assistant Professor Francesca Mangialasche who is the scientific coordinator of this initiative.

More information: Finnish Geriatric Intervention Study to Prevent Cognitive Impairment and Disability - FINGER trial:
clinicaltrials.gov/ct2/show/NCT01041989

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