

COVID19
What We've Learned
So Far From Your Survey Responses

Sally A. Shumaker, PhD

The Women's Health Initiative is uniquely valuable to advancing scientific knowledge on the Impact of COVID-19 in Older Women:

- Long history of following the WHI Participants before & during COVID-19
- The strong commitment of the WHI participants in continuing to advance knowledge on women and aging for generations to come.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on older women in the Women's Health Initiative.

Lead Author: TranVoPham

Key Findings – Women reported:

- Very good or good well-being
- A decrease in physical activity
 - when compared to before the pandemic
 - Especially in women living in urban areas
- A decrease in alcohol consumption

Impact of COVID, continued. . .

Key Findings – women reported:

- Taking steps to reduce risk (for example):
 - 93% wearing masks
 - 91% washing hands frequently
 - 89% maintaining physical distance
 - 81% avoiding shaking hands
 - 79% staying at home
- Concerns about the pandemic across the group, but more common among urban residents
- Rural residents were less likely to avoid in-person social activities.

Take Home Messages

Concern regarding the pandemic was widespread. Further, you took active measures to protect yourselves.

At the same time, women reported overall positive well-being. In general, older women consistently report higher levels of well-being and life quality – and this was reflected even during the early stages of the pandemic.

The relationship of social connectedness with decreasing physical activity during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Lead Author: Carolyn Crandall

Key Findings:

- Those of you who were more socially connected were more likely to maintain your physical activity during the pandemic.
- This finding did not differ by age, education level, use of technology to stay in touch with others, or physical function scores.

Take Home Message

Aging is generally accompanied by decreasing physical activity, which is associated with many critical health outcomes. This has led to recommendations for older adults to increase or at least maintain physical activity.

Maintaining social connections could significantly impact the degree to which women remain active.

Associations between changes in loneliness and social connections, and mental health during the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Women's Health Initiative
Lead Author: Joe Goveas

Key Findings:

- The number of women who endorsed *severe/intense* loneliness before the pandemic, *doubled* during the pandemic.
- Women who endorsed at least some loneliness pre-pandemic increased from 31% to 46% during the pandemic.
- Social connection factors were disrupted during the pandemic and these **disruptions were associated with worsening of loneliness from pre- to pandemic levels.**

Loneliness and social connections, and mental health during the COVID-19 Pandemic, continued:

- **Loneliness** was associated with increased perceived stress, anxiety, & depressive symptoms.
- Factors that protected against loneliness were:
 - being physically active (walking 4 or more times per week),
 - more optimistic, and
 - reporting a higher purpose in life

Loneliness and social connections, and mental health during the COVID-19 Pandemic, continued. . .

- Factors associated with greater loneliness were:
 - older than 80 years,
 - smoking,
 - a greater number of stressful life events, and
 - losses including death or serious illness of a close friend or family member, or death of a spouse or partner

Take Home Message on Loneliness & Isolation

Loneliness & isolation often increase with age. The COVID pandemic has exacerbated this concern in older women.

Among all of the *objective* measures of social connection disruption, *perceived* social disconnection (loneliness) is the one that is most related to key psychological variables.

Loneliness is “The Elephant in the Room”

Methods to effectively address this threat to the health of older women are critically needed.

Association of global cognitive function with psychological distress and adherence to public health recommendations during the COVID-19 pandemic: The Women's Health Initiative.
Lead Author: Aladdin Shadyab

Key Findings

- Women with cognitive decline *in the year prior to the pandemic* were more likely to experience stress and depressive symptoms during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Greater depressive symptoms during the pandemic were associated with cognitive decline during the pandemic.

Take Home Message

Normal cognitive decline increases with age. Major stressors – like the pandemic - can exacerbate the trajectory of decline.

Both stress & depressive symptoms are associated with cognitive decline.

Methods to reduce or actively address experiences of stress & depressive symptoms are critical to cognitive resilience as we age.

Next Steps in Advancing Science on COVID19 in WHI

Using the rich information derived from the 1st & 2nd WHI COVID surveys:

- Several manuscripts are underway in WHI, with others to come
- New Studies on COVID in WHI are under Development