



The PATH Through Life Project: The Early Impact of COVID-19 and Lockdowns on Health Outcomes for older adults

Results in brief

The COVID-19 outbreak impacted many aspects of people's lives, and for some people this led to social isolation, job insecurity, uncertainty about the future and/or potential psychological distress.

This report focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak and the initial lockdown period in early to mid-2020 on the health and wellbeing of older adults aged 59–65 years from the ACT and surrounding regions. The Personality & Total Health (PATH) Through Life project is a large, longitudinal study that has surveyed participants since 1999/2000. In late 2019 and mid-2020, 1,069 participants aged 59–65 years completed the fifth wave of data collection. An additional questionnaire obtained information regarding each participant's experience of COVID-19.

Key messages

- Overall, older adults, aged 59–65 years were resilient to the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and physical distancing restrictions introduced to limit the spread of COVID-19 in the ACT.
- However, those people who reported feeling more personally affected by COVID-19, e.g. they had reduced socialising and other activities and reported higher personal concerns about infection, also reported poorer mental health outcomes. They reported higher levels of anxiety, depression, suicidality and poorer sleep quality than those who felt less impacted by COVID-19.
- Australia's start to the COVID-19 pandemic was unique, occurring immediately after the devastating bushfires over the 2019-2020 summer season. This study found that those people who had been directly exposed to the bushfires reported increased negative effects of COVID-19 compared with those people who were not directly exposed to the bushfires. This finding indicates that the impacts on mental health from multiple disasters can be cumulative



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Health outcomes before and during COVID-19 lockdowns

Overall, the mental and physical health of this cohort (aged 59–65 years) was not negatively affected during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. This may be due to participants being surveyed early into lockdown (April to June 2020) when COVID-19 case numbers were low and the impacts of extended lockdowns had not yet occurred.

Alcohol use was the only health outcome that was found to be higher during the early stages of the pandemic, which was consistent with national trends. The study found lower rates of suicidality, smoking and psychological trauma during the early stages of the pandemic, compared to before the pandemic. These health improvements may be a return to baseline levels following spikes driven by the earlier bushfires

Exposure to bushfires and impacts of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic occurred shortly after one of the most devastating bushfire seasons in Australia's history, with bushfires impacting the ACT and surrounding regions. This study considered the effect of multiple disasters on the mental health of participants.

People who reported being directly exposed to bushfires, i.e. they were involved in firefighting; had their home, possessions or workplace damaged; or experienced health issues due to fire, also reported increased impacts due to COVID-19 e.g. increased concerns about their health and safety. Reported impacts of COVID-19 were significantly lower for those people who had not been directly impacted by the bushfires.

Report conclusions

The PATH Through Life Project: The Early Impact of COVID-19 and Lockdowns on Health Outcomes for a Cohort of Older Adults report examined the early effects of COVID-19 on the health of PATH participants aged 59–65 years in the context of the 2019/2020 bushfires. Overall, PATH participants were relatively resilient during the early stages of COVID-19 and physical distancing policies. However, there were greater impacts for people who had experienced direct exposure to the bushfires in the months prior to the onset of the global COVID-19 pandemic. This report contributes important insights into the impact of COVID-19 on the physical and mental health outcomes for older adults in the ACT and surrounding regions. This information can help inform potential strategies to support resilience and protect health for older adults.

Acknowledgements

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To access the full report, click the download links on page one or visit the ACT Health [HealthStats website](#).



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