

## COVID-19 and older adults: in the face of a global disaster

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### Abstract

The Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is having a particularly increased impact on older adults as the case fatality rate increases with age. Besides this, isolation, inadequate basic support and an over-stretched health care system are adversely affecting the elderly population. These are leading to psychosocial and interpersonal issues besides the compounded physical and mental health concerns. It is probable that the needs of the elderly are being neglected during the pandemic. While the health, economic and other societal consequences of the pandemic are being managed, support systems and communities should take timely steps to support the older adults adequately.

### Key words

Aged, COVID-19, Disaster, Risk, Stress, Management

### Introduction

Pandemics are not new; the world has experienced many for centuries and some in the not-so-distant past. The possibility of a virus pandemic was well within the awareness of scientific community and policy makers. There is an appreciable knowledgebase in understanding virus infections, and preventing, containing and treating these illnesses. In spite of these, the Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is a catastrophic reality which has affected the whole world in a very short period, with a colossal loss of life and livelihood. It is a disaster that is continuing to evolve and we are far from the exact picture of this pandemic and its effect on life as a whole. There are many unknown factors; and the uncertainties are ripe.

### Risk for older adults

Early in the course of the COVID-19 pandemic it was identified that older adults have a higher case fatality rate,<sup>1</sup> although it affects almost all age groups.<sup>2,3</sup> Individuals with comorbidities are at particular risk; and in old age multimorbidity is common.

There are many additional issues for the older adults related to the changing social and medical support levels during COVID-19. Like any other disaster situations the

services are stretched and are available to a proportion rather than the whole population. Another concern is the isolation and their effects on the elderly.<sup>2,4</sup> The issues are more acute for those who are dependent on others for their basic needs, those who are living alone and residents of care homes. Although many countries could set up support systems and many voluntary organisations stepped in to help in most parts of the world, older adults continue to experience difficulties. As health care systems are stretched, it is quite possible that the support for the older adults with chronic non-communicable diseases is compromised to a variable extent. While the attention at the moment is understandably focused to contain the spread of the virus, provide treatment and arrange economic support for the general public; there is a specific need to address the issues of the older adults as well. Older adults are known to have increased vulnerability during disastrous situations;<sup>5</sup> and it is a reality that their needs are often neglected.

### Action points

#### Protecting the vulnerable

Protecting the vulnerable groups, especially the elderly requires special measures. Isolating them from the exposure to infection is the need of the hour, whether it is from visiting family members or caregivers, and avoiding infection during hospital visits for other illnesses is extremely important. Adhering to the measures to control the spread of the virus as suggested by the authorities is essential for all. As the process of protecting the vulnerable people will probably continue for a while, the support systems around them should be robust.

#### Maintaining nutrition and health care

During this crisis and isolation, taking care of the basic needs of the elderly such as diet and nutrition, continuing care for their existing ailments, maintaining the availability of medicines, hospital care, nursing and other measures as before are important. Support to maintain their activities of daily living and physical activity is crucial, especially for the elderly who have been dependent on others. There may be a great divide between older adults in rural and urban areas where the challenges could be different. This will involve coordinated local measures and resources to provide them not only financial but material support to maintain day-to-day life.

## Supporting mental health

Supporting the elderly to deal with the psychological effects of disastrous situation and isolation is the next major task. Isolation affects mental health; many will develop anxiety, depression and stress symptoms, and would require help. It is a concern that many will suffer silently without communicating their distress, and there may not be any scope or resources in many parts of the world to provide psychological support to them. Most of the elderly may not have access to internet based resources or would not know how to use it. As socialisation will remain curtailed, it is important that caregivers should take special effort to communicate and stay in touch with elderly relatives and neighbours during these periods.

Individual and community stress levels are high during the pandemic; and there could be many reasons. Risk of infection, fear of death, death of known persons by COVID-19, financial problems, inadequate care and support, isolation and sometimes lack of basic necessities of life are some of the factors. It is extremely important to manage stress during this period before it affects both physical and mental health, and quality of life.

There are many ways stress can be addressed. Remaining busy in activities, setting up and sticking to a routine, daily physical exercise, yoga, meditation, relaxing activities, spending time in activities that one likes are helpful strategies. Remaining in touch with family and friends, with available means, sharing and venting can help. Limiting exposure to stressful information from media is important too. Identifying stress symptoms and taking measures early is the key. Sometimes it may be required for some people to seek help from professionals, usually in the form of counselling, relaxation and supportive therapy. Very few older adults may require medications, e.g. for insomnia, anxiety and depression. It is important not to self-medicate or indulge in substance use to manage stress, which may add further complications.

There are many resources on stress management available from professional bodies through electronic and print media.<sup>3,6</sup> Older adults with cognitive impairments should be provided the information in clear, concise and written form. The stress management strategies should be culturally appropriate to make them more acceptable and usable. Providing mental health care and information during other supportive work is often helpful.

It appears that for a considerable period of time the usual personal, social and cultural life will remain affected by the pandemic. Learning to live differently will be increasingly essential, which will involve changing behaviour and adapting to new realities by both elderly and their carers; sooner one realises this and accepts the better.

## Supporting the care-givers

As an ancillary, all carers and supporting health professionals providing elderly with care and attending to their basic needs, need to ensure that there is no chance of

contaminating the elderly during the process. It will require regular testing for infection and use of appropriate personal protection equipment. The carers will also need to be supported for their own emotional health during this period of crisis with many untimely deaths, hopelessness and anguish.

## Conclusion

There is progress in the science about understanding viral infections, their prevention and treatment. However there are challenges; and developing intervention measures would take time. In the meantime, everyone in society has a role to play to stop the progress of this infection, protect themselves and the vulnerable people in their communities. These experiences may lead to a new world order of working together and supporting each other beyond the political boundaries to improve and protect health. Hope will be a crucial element of recovery, as long as it takes.

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**Competing interests:** None.

**Received:** 11 May 2020; **Revised:** 15 May 2020; **Accepted:** 16 May 2020

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**Citation:** Kar N. Covid-19 and older adults: in the face of a global disaster. *Journal of Geriatric Care and Research* 2020, 7(1): 1-2.

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