

Findings reveal stark health impacts of 'cocooning' for older people

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Findings of a new study published by researchers from Trinity College Dublin and St James's Hospital outline the health impacts faced by older people while cocooning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings are published in the *Quarterly Journal of Medicine*.

Cocooning involves staying at home and reducing face-to-face interaction with other people and is an important part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with an overall aim to prevent transmission to vulnerable older people. However, concerns exist regarding the long-term adverse effects it may have on their physical and [mental health](#).

The research examines trends in physical and mental health, access to healthcare services and attitudes to COVID-19 while cocooning amongst people aged 70 years or more who did not contract COVID-19.

Key findings

- Almost 40% of participants reported that

their mental health was worse or much worse since the start of cocooning.

- Over 57% of participants reported loneliness at least some of the time while cocooning with 1 in 8 reporting that they were lonely 'very often.' Participants were almost twice as likely to report loneliness if they lived alone.
- Over 40% of participants reported a decline in their [physical health](#) since cocooning and 1 in 5 reported not leaving their house at all since being advised to cocoon
- Despite this, over 60% of participants reported that they agreed with the government advice regarding cocooning while one quarter of participants reported that they did not agree with the advice.
- Over 40% of participants reported that they disliked the term 'cocooning' however, while almost 10% reported that they liked the term.
- Almost 1 in 6 participants reported that while cocooning they did not seek medical attention for an illness, when they otherwise would have done so. Half of those who did not seek medical attention said this was because they were afraid of catching COVID-19.

Dr. Robert Briggs, Medical Gerontology, Trinity College and Consultant Geriatrician, St James's Hospital, Dublin and senior author of the study, said, "These findings highlight the potential secondary impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on older people. While cocooning is important and reduces the likelihood of older people becoming unwell with COVID-19, there may be important adverse impacts on the [health](#) of those who cocoon that also need to be addressed. Given the possibility of further waves of COVID-19, with the likelihood of ongoing restrictions despite the rollout of vaccines, clear policies and advice for older people around strategies to maintain social engagement, manage loneliness and continue

physical activity should be a priority."

Dr. Laura Bailey, Specialist Registrar in Geriatric Medicine, St James's Hospital, Dublin and first author of the study said, "It is a particular worry that 1 in 6 older people who were acutely unwell did not seek medical attention, often for fear of contracting COVID-19. We must give a clear message to older people that when you are unwell that you should seek [medical attention](#) and that hospitals and general practices have appropriate infection control practices in place and continue to deal with non-COVID-19 related medical issues."

More information: Laura Bailey et al. Physical and Mental Health of Older People while Cocooning during the COVID-19 Pandemic, *QJM: An International Journal of Medicine* (2021). DOI: [10.1093/qjmed/hcab015](https://doi.org/10.1093/qjmed/hcab015)

Provided by Trinity College Dublin

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