

## Addressing the Top Healthcare Challenges of Canada's Older Population

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The pandemic brought into sharp focus the vulnerability of older adults to Coronavirus. When the pandemic started, researchers at the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) Institute of Ageing prioritized the most pressing needs for older adults. The Institute contacted researchers and nonprofit agencies from across Canada to identify key topics. (1) This article covers their findings and how this will shape the future of home care and community care organizations.

### Home Care Defined

Home care and community care organizations are a vital part of a comprehensive healthcare system. For patients, it offers residential long-term and short-term care. Some examples include:

- Providing assistance and care to older adults
- Rehabilitation after surgery or medical conditions that are short-term
- Care for those with complex, chronic health problems, special needs, or disabilities
- Care at the end of life

Older adults are the fastest-growing segment of the Canadian population, and they also have some of the most complex healthcare needs. Currently there are more people aged 65 and older in Canada than those under 14. A rapidly growing elderly population in Canada will increase the demand for continuing care. The elderly population is expected to grow for the next two decades, so health care providers, administrators, and planners throughout the country are working to make this sector more sustainable.

### Assessing the Top-Priority Needs for Older Adults

Research initiatives like the ones led by the CIHR are helping healthcare workers to better understand some of the problems that occurred during the first wave of the pandemic in long-term care homes. Their findings can aid in determining the best practices to stop these problems from happening again, not just for COVID-19, but also for other health emergencies and outbreaks.

Following are the top three priorities for older adult care in light of COVID-19, as determined by research from the CIHR.

**1. Assessing How COVID-19 Uniquely Affects Older Adults** An important part of the study was determining how and why COVID-19 progressed differently in older adults, and how that might affect the response to treatment and vaccination.

**2. Understanding the Impact of Isolation on Mental and Cognitive Health**

An additional study focused on studying the psychological consequences of isolated older adults to reduce their infection risk. In addition to the elderly who could not see their family members, those whose community-based care had been cancelled, and those confined to long-term care facilities, pandemic-related isolation was particularly concerning. The effect of this isolation on mental and cognitive health for this segment of the population was of particular concern.

**3. Setting New Standards for Infection Control**

The third and final priority was infection control and health care standards in long-term care facilities.

The CIHR Institute for Aging and its provincial partners are using this research to collaboratively develop a funding opportunity to address these issues. They are funding research teams across Canada to evaluate what changes to care practices and policies in long-term care facilities are effective at protecting residents and staff, as well as improving quality of life during viral outbreaks.

## **Looking Ahead**

According to a commentary from the National Institute on Ageing, over 430,000 adults in Canada have unmet home care needs. Meanwhile, over 40,000 Canadians are currently on nursing home waitlists due to a lack of home and community-based care services. (2) Those figures were from 2019.

Now more than ever, Canada's healthcare system needs affordable and sustainable solutions to support the complex needs of its ageing population. That is why research institutions are focused on ways to support non-hospital facilities that encourage healthy ageing. The CIHR Healthy Cities Research Initiative, for example, is particularly focused on research that promotes age-friendly communities. The organization also supports research in digital health and technology to enable older adults to live independently and successfully at home as long as possible.

These facilities face a challenging road ahead and will require the support of not just funding, but robust coverage.

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### Sources:

1. <https://news.westernu.ca/2021/08/healthy-aging-key-research-priority-for-robarts-research-scientist/>
2. <https://www.nia-ryerson.ca/commentary-posts/9/9/canada-is-not-keeping-pace-with-the-needs-of-its-rapidly-ageing-population>