

Blog2. Understanding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on People Living with Dementia: Insights and Recommendations

The COVID-19 pandemic has created specific problems for people living with dementia (PLWD) and their caregivers. Dementia is a disorder associated with a severe deterioration in cognitive performance across several areas that exceeds what is considered normal for age-related changes (ICD-11, 2024). While memory impairment is a distinguishing trait, dementia also includes broader cognitive abnormalities affecting decision-making, speech, understanding, reaction time, and spatial perception, that significantly reduce an individual's ability to perform everyday activities independently (ICD-11, 2024).

Several studies offer varying perspectives and insights into how this vulnerable population was affected by pandemic. The lockdown measures and reduced access to support services have exacerbated symptoms such as loneliness, anxiety, and depression among PLWD (Hanna et al., 2022; Masterson-Algar et al., 2022). For example, the Alzheimer's Society's (2020) study noted complaints about restricted support provided to 41% of participants and pre-existing gaps in access for 57% of those who were initially refused services. Similarly, Bakker et al. (2023) and Talbot and Briggs (2021) highlight the accelerated cognitive decline and increased social isolation experienced by PLWD during the pandemic.

A small group of PLWD interviewed by Talbot and Briggs (2021) state that pandemic challenges lead them to a sense of "shrinking world." While PLWD found comfort and achievement in their home environments during lockdown, they also experienced a loss of cognitive stimulation and social interactions typically found outdoors (Talbot and Briggs, 2021). However, as lockdown measures eased, a cautious approach to outdoor activities was evident, particularly among PLWD living alone. While over half of respondents resumed outdoor gatherings, only 19% of PLWD living alone engaged in such activities, emphasising their heightened sense of uncertainty (Alzheimer's Society, 2020).

Overall, each of the studies aforementioned offers unique recommendations for addressing the challenges faced by PLWD and their caregivers. While Alzheimer's Society (2020) and Hanna et al. (2022) emphasise the importance of maintaining access to support services and mental support, Bakker et al. (2023) and Talbot and Briggs (2021) advocate for tailored interventions to address cognitive decline and social isolation, respectively. Masterson-Algar et al. (2022) focus on the need for reforming support systems for caregivers based on lessons learned during the pandemic.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the missions of Dementia UK and Alzheimer's Society UK have become even more crucial as the impact of the pandemic has increased the challenges faced by PLWD and their caregivers. They expanded its online support services, helplines, and virtual support groups to reach people and their loved ones affected by dementia across the country

(<https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/get-support/coronavirus> and <https://www.dementiauk.org/information-and-support/how-we-can-support-you/>).

Reference list

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