

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Lifestyle

Of older people who participated in the survey on their own behalf, over one third (39.1 per cent) lived alone, 54.9 per cent lived with a spouse or partner and 9.3 per cent lived with their children. Six per cent of older people indicated they were employed full time or part-time, and 82.1 per cent were receiving a pension or benefit.

Over half (53.3 per cent) of older people said they were financially comfortable, 43.7 per cent said they had just enough to get along and 2.1 per cent said they could not make ends meet.

The majority (68.0 per cent) of older people reported being fairly or very socially active, 91.2 per cent reported there were people to share joint activities, and 88.0 per cent had someone to confide in.

About one in five (22.0 per cent) older people reported doing volunteer work for an organisation in the last six months, while 9.2 per cent indicated they had the main responsibility in caring for someone who has a long-term illness, disability or other problem.

About two-thirds (64.7 per cent) of older people reported feeling safe at home all the time, 30.0 per cent felt safe most of the time, and 4.0 per cent felt safe some of the time. Over half (53.5 per cent) felt safe in their neighbourhood all the time, 37.0 per cent felt safe most of the time and 7.8 per cent felt safe some of the time.

The most common hopes for the future included to stay healthy/free of disability/maintain faculties (28.9 per cent), and to continue living as now/normally (7.7 per cent). The most common fears expressed by older people concerned their own physical health (20.6 per cent), and losing their independence (13.9 per cent).

Self-Rated Health

Over one-third (37.6 per cent) of older people rated their health as very good or excellent and 54.3 per cent as fair or poor. Over one third of older people (37.5 per cent) said they have health problems that cause them difficulty in getting around and doing things for themselves. One in 12 (8.9 per cent) older people reported that in the last 12 months they had spent more than a complete week in bed at home because of illness or accident.

Health Service Use

Almost all older people interviewed had visited a GP in the last 12 months (96.0 per cent), and over one third (38.7 per cent) had visited a GP in the last two weeks. A smaller proportion reported a community nurse visit in the last 12 months (6.8 per cent) or two weeks (2.7 per cent).

About one in five (20.4 per cent) older people visited or were visited by a chiropodist in the last 12 months, 15.0

per cent consulted a chemist about a health problem and 14.0 per cent visited or were visited by a physiotherapist.

Almost three-quarters (71.2 per cent) of older people reported having an influenza (flu) vaccination in the last 12 months, 77.4 per cent reported having their eyes checked in the last two years, and 19.0 per cent reported having a hearing check in the last two years.

Use of Community Services

About one in five (20.7 per cent) older people reported receiving help in the previous week from an organised community service for household duties, home maintenance or personal care which they could not do on their own. The most common help received was for home maintenance or gardening (9.6 per cent), followed by household duties (8.5 per cent) and meals (2.5 per cent).

In the previous four weeks, 1.4 per cent of older people reported receiving respite care at home, 1.0 per cent had stayed overnight in respite care, and 0.9 per cent had attended a day care centre.

About one in 12 people indicated that they needed help or more help with household duties, personal care, or other tasks at home. The most common need was for assistance with household duties (5.4 per cent of older people), and home maintenance or gardening (5.2 per cent).

Older People as Carers

Almost one in 10 (9.2 per cent) older people indicated they had the main responsibility in caring for someone who has a long-term illness, disability or other problem.

In the previous week a minority of carers had received services at home to help with their caring, including: services to help with household duties (13.0 per cent), home nursing services (8.6 per cent), home maintenance and gardening (6.9 per cent), and help with personal care (6.0 per cent). In the previous four weeks, 4.9 per cent of carers received support through the services of a day care centre and 2.5 per cent had received respite care services at home.

About one in six (16.4 per cent) carers said they needed more help with carer support, household duties, personal care, or other jobs around the house. The most commonly identified needs were help with household duties (8.7 per cent), home maintenance and gardening (6.1 per cent), and personal care (2.8 per cent).

Nutrition and Food Security

Overall, about one-third (36.0 per cent) of older people reported eating the recommended quantity of vegetables each day, and a much higher percentage (57.6 per cent) reported eating the recommended quantity of fruit. In terms of food security, 1.9 per cent of older people reported that, on at least one occasion in the last 12 months, they had run out of food and could not afford to buy any more.

Physical Activity

Almost half (48.9 per cent) of older people reported taking adequate physical activity. As would be expected, this declined with age from 56.4 per cent among 65–69 year-olds to 34.7 per cent among those aged 85 years and older.

The most common reason that kept older people from being more physically active was health problems (72.0 per cent), while a smaller proportion (4.4 per cent) of older people identified problems with pain as being a factor.

Physical Functioning

The 1999 Older People's Health Survey covered several areas of physical functioning, including the SF-36 measure of physical functioning. Physical functioning measured by the SF-36 was better among males than females at all ages.

Almost three quarters (72.2 per cent) of older people said their sight for reading was fair or poor (including glasses) and 70.6 per cent said their sight for distance was fair or poor (including glasses). Hearing (including any hearing aid) was rated as fair or poor by 77.1 per cent of older people.

Over the six months prior to interview, 21.5 per cent of older people reported having pain that lasted for three months or more. Of these, 41.1 per cent described the pain as strong or severe, 42.2 per cent as moderate, and 15.1 per cent as mild or weak.

The majority of older people interviewed were able to carry out most activities of daily living independently. In order to make their homes easier to live in, about one in five (20.2 per cent) older people reported installing grab bars or rails in the house, putting in a bathseat, handshower or non-slip mats (17.5 per cent), increased lighting (9.6 per cent), or had improved paths or steps (9.0 per cent).

Falls

About one quarter (26.8 per cent) of people aged 65 years and over reported a fall in the previous 12 months and one in 12 (8.6 per cent) reported at least one fall requiring medical attention. Over one quarter (28.5 per cent) of older people reported being afraid of falling. About one quarter (23.5 per cent) reported that they already exercise to reduce the risk of falls and a further 30.9 per cent indicated they would consider doing a program of gentle exercise in order to reduce their chances of falling.

Mental Health and Well-being

The majority (74.5 per cent) of older people reported feeling happy most of the time in the last four weeks, 70.6 per cent reported feeling mostly calm or peaceful, 4.8 per cent felt mostly bored and 5.2 per cent felt mostly lonely.

Overall, 3.0 per cent of older people stated that they felt depressed most of the time in the previous four weeks, while 29.5 per cent reported feeling depressed some or most of the time. In the four weeks prior to interview, 7.8 per cent of older people reported seeing a health professional about feelings of anxiety or depression.

Diabetes

The prevalence of current doctor-diagnosed diabetes or high blood sugar among older people was 12.2 per cent. Among those with diabetes or high blood sugar, 47.3 per cent reported that their feet had been checked and 61.9 per cent reported that their eyes had been checked at least once in the previous 12 months.

Oral Health

About one in 20 (5.4 per cent) respondents reported having none of their natural teeth missing, 66.0 per cent reporting that some of their natural teeth were missing and 28.7 per cent reported that all of their natural teeth were missing.

About one in five (20.1 per cent) older people reported sometimes, often or very often being concerned about the appearance of their teeth, mouth or dentures in the last 12 months, and 18.7 per cent reported that they had avoided eating certain foods sometimes, often or very often in the last 12 months because of problems with their teeth, mouth or dentures.

The Health of Older People Who Responded by Proxy

Proxy respondents reported a higher rate of health problems and a greater need for care than non-proxy respondents. Almost all (97.3 per cent) proxy respondents had visited a local doctor in the last 12 months and 55.0 per cent in the last two weeks. In the last 12 months, 40.7 per cent had spent at least one night in hospital, and 25.6 per cent had been visited by a community nurse or private nursing service.

In relation to activities of daily living, 52.2 per cent of proxy respondents were not able to do household duties independently and 68.2 per cent needed help with their personal care. In the previous week, 11.6 per cent had received assistance with household duties and 7.9 per cent with personal care.

Among proxy respondents, 38.4 per cent reported having a fall in the last 12 months which required medical treatment. This is substantially higher than the 8.6 per cent reported for non-proxy respondents.

Diabetes or high blood sugar were reported among 19.2 per cent of proxy respondents, higher than the 12.2 per cent among non-proxy respondents.

Half (49.4 per cent) of proxy-respondents had some of their natural teeth missing, 43.7 per cent had all their natural teeth missing and 6.5 per cent had no natural teeth missing. The rate of edentulism (all natural teeth missing) was higher than the 28.7 per cent reported for non-proxy respondents.

Proxy informants were asked a series of questions comprising the Short Concord Informant Dementia Scale (SCIDS). It is estimated that there are over 23,000 older people living at home in NSW who have, or are likely to have, dementia.