

The Impact of COVID-19 on the Health of Individuals with Multiple Sclerosis

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BACKGROUND: The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people with chronic health conditions has been particularly concerning. We interviewed 24 individuals with long-standing multiple sclerosis (MS) about their perceptions of COVID shutdowns on their health.

METHODS

1. In June/July 2020, interviewed by telephone 6 males and 18 females from an on-going longitudinal study of health promotion among Texans with MS.
2. Asked about individuals' ability to take care of their health, health care, and daily activities.
3. Created a cross-case matrix (Miles and Huberman, 1994) to organize codes and text by question.

SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

- Average age = 66 years; 6 employed
- Half were married/living with significant others
- Diagnosed with MS = 32 years
- Average EDSS-S score of 5.8 indicates moderate impairment; 54% had the more debilitating progressive form of MS

ABBREVIATIONS
MS = Multiple Sclerosis
EDSS-S = Self-administered Expanded Disability Status Scale

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LOSS OF SPONTANEITY IN DAILY LIFE

"It cut it all down...
I don't have anything anymore."

"I have lots of friends at the
nursing home...
you can't see them."

FEELING ISOLATED

"I feel more energy when I'm
being with people and
socializing.
And I don't have that additional
energy."

NEGATIVE IMPACTS ON HEALTH AND HEALTH PROMOTION

"Before I would do grocery
shopping, and I would make
store runs, so I could do a lot of
walking in the stores where it
was air conditioned. So that's
limited (because of COVID)."

RESILIENCE

"I learned to live with
limitations because of MS."
"Take it easy
and take it as it comes."

FINDINGS

Most individuals initially reported few health effects from COVID-19 shut-downs and could utilize telehealth for doctor's appointments. However, additional probing revealed four themes:

1. **Loss of spontaneity in daily life** – Individuals could no longer go out casually in the community
2. **Negative impacts on health and health promotion** – People were getting weaker/having poorer balance because usual exercise options were not available. Diet was also poorer.
3. **Feeling isolated** – Because of their age and medical conditions, they stayed away from others, even avoiding doctor's offices.
4. **Resilience** – Individuals drew on previously developed coping skills, such as cognitive reframing.

CONCLUSION

Longer-term impacts of the COVID 19 pandemic on physical functioning and emotional well-being should be monitored and addressed in future research about people with MS.

Figure 1. Four Themes about Individuals' Ability to Take Care of Their Health, Health care, and Daily Activities