

Social contact, social participation, and their changes among elderly people in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Background: The study aims to assess changes of social contact and social participation during the COVID-19 pandemic among the US elderly, and what roles the prior physical and cognitive performances of the elderly played.

Method: Data were from the National Health and Aging Trends Study (NHATS) COVID-19 questionnaire in 2020 (n=3,188, response rate=80.5%).¹ Data was linked to the 2019 round to include the demographics, physical and cognitive performances of the participants. Participants that reported COVID-19 diagnosis and symptoms (n=288) and represented by proxies (n=414) were excluded. Frequencies of social contact with family and friends (phone calls/emails/texts/person visits) and with health care providers, and social participation (working, volunteering, attending religious services, and attending organized activities) prior to and during the COVID-19 were compared using paired t test for summed scores, Wilcoxon signed rank for paired categorical variables, and McNamara test for paired binary variables. Weighted linear and logistic regressions adjusted for multiple covariates were used to investigate the effects of prior physical and cognitive performances on social contact and social participation, prior to, during, and changes in the COVID-19.

Result: A total of 2,486 participants were included (mean age: 78.24 years; female: 56.20%; non-Hispanic White: 88.43%). The COVID-19 resulted in significant increased social contact with family and friends but decreased social participation, among the elderly. Furthermore, elder people with better prior physical performance reported significant increased social contact with family and friends and social participation, both prior to and during the COVID-19, while they reported significant decreased social participation during the COVID-19. Specially, better prior physical performance was associated with significant increased video calls and volunteering work during the COVID-19. However, prior cognitive ability was not found a significant risk factor.

Conclusion: The COVID-19 pandemic affected the pattern of social contact and social participation of the US elderly. Prior physical performance, rather than prior cognitive ability, significantly affected the social way old people respond to a pandemic crisis.