

Documenting the toll of COVID-19 on Ireland's older people

Trinity researchers to study how people 50 years and older in Ireland have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.



Researchers at the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA), Trinity College Dublin are analysing how the COVID-19 outbreak, and subsequent measures to 'flatten the curve', have impacted adults over 50 in Ireland. Over 6,000 TILDA participants will participate in the project to detail how their health, activities, social lives, mood, quality of life, psychological state and expectations have been altered by the pandemic.

Alongside this, a second TILDA COVID-19 project will gather biological samples to establish who has been infected by the virus and determine the risk factors and consequences for developing COVID-19 in older adults in Ireland.

Both studies combined, aim to help and support health systems and policymakers to strengthen and improve the national response to COVID-19 in the longer term.

Older people disproportionately affected by crisis

An analysis of confirmed deaths by the Central Statistics Office shows that COVID-19 has had the greatest impact on people aged 65 or over. This age group accounted for almost 92% of confirmed deaths between March 11th to May 15th, 2020.

People aged 70 and over were directed to stay indoors, curtail social visits from friends and family, and halt outdoor exercise – activities that shape everyday routine and quality of life. Ageist terminology was sometimes employed by the media and others.

TILDA researchers will determine the full scale of the impact of COVID-19 on a wide number of outcomes. The information is critical to inform future policy in relation to further outbreaks or the long-term consequences of this outbreak and to better understand the actions of the infection in adults over 50 and thereby inform future vaccination and treatment solutions.

How will the survey work?

The Self-Completion Questionnaire (SCQ) will be delivered to a nationally representative sample of over 6,000 current participants in the Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) across Ireland. The questionnaire will collect information on the experience of older adults who have experienced COVID-19 as well as those who have not, but who have been affected by the pandemic and public health measures. Aside from the effects of the pandemic on physical, psychological, and cognitive health, researchers will gather data on unmet care needs; use of sources of information about the pandemic; any experience of ageism and the impact of caring for family members and friends. The surveys have been distributed at a key time, as Ireland has entered phase three of the government's plan to re-open the country following the outbreak of the virus. The information will be linked to eleven years of existing social, economic and health data previously gathered from these same participants, as part of the TILDA study, which will help to understand early risks and determinants of susceptibility to the outcomes of COVID-19. TILDA is uniquely positioned to use this existing data base of a large representative sample to help public health policy makers and healthcare systems better understand the effects of the pandemic.

Dr Mark Ward, TILDA Senior Researcher, who led the design of the SCQ, said:

“The world is living through a unique time in history as we grapple with the fallout of COVID-19 across the globe. The outbreak of this disease has affected every aspect of our lives and has particularly affected older people. This research provides a unique opportunity for older people living in Ireland to document their experience so that we can learn how to improve public health responses in the future.”

Professor Rose Anne Kenny, Principal Investigator of TILDA and head researcher, said:

“For the past 11 years, TILDA has gathered comprehensive research information on all aspects of the overall health, economic and social circumstances of adults over 50 in Ireland. TILDA is a representative sample, which means that we can generalise the information to the entire population because of the epidemiological methods employed to recruit the TILDA participant sample. None of this is possible without the support of our committed TILDA participants. By linking our past data with their experience of the pandemic, we can assess a broad tapestry of how the pandemic has and will impact the lives people in Ireland. Furthermore, aligned with the analysis of biological samples, we will be able to explore what determines susceptibility both to infection and the response to fighting the infection. This is important information for scientists who are developing treatments and vaccinations. We look forward to providing a platform for the experience of older people to be heard.”

To find out more about the project, entitled ‘**Altered lives in a time of crisis: Preparing for recovery from the impact of the COVID- 19 pandemic on the lives of older adults**’, please visit www.tilda.ie.