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NEWS RELEASE

New NIA Report Highlights Significant Gaps in Health Care Access for Older Adults






Nearly 5 million Canadians aged 50+ without reliable primary care

TORONTO, October 8, 2024 — As Canada's population continues to age, the demands on the health care system are intensifying. Based on data from the NIA's 2023 Ageing in Canada Survey, a new report, [Health Care Access Among Older Canadians](#), examines the challenges Canadians 50+ face in accessing health care services and the many ways the Canadian health care system is struggling to meet the complex needs of older adults.

The NIA's 2023 Ageing in Canada Survey reveals that many older Canadians struggle to get the care they need, despite typically requiring more frequent access to health services due to chronic conditions and multi-morbidity. The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated these challenges, by accelerating staff shortages, delayed care, and increased wait times. The report warns that access to a regular primary care provider may be even worse than what was previously understood, with nearly 5 million older Canadians without access to reliable primary care.

"According to our survey, only 65% of Canadians aged 50 and older have access to a regular primary care provider such as a family doctor or nurse practitioner," says Dr. Samir Sinha, Director of Health Policy Research of the NIA. "This suggests that nearly five million older Canadians may lack consistent access to essential health care services — a clear sign that our system is failing to meet the needs of this growing population."

The report uncovers that among older adults who required health care in 2023, one-third (32%) reported difficulty accessing needed services, stating they could only do so "sometimes, rarely, or never." The most common barriers to care cited by respondents were appointment-related issues, including long wait times and difficulties securing appointments. Affordability and location-related challenges also contributed to access issues, albeit to a lesser extent.

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Women, rural residents, individuals in certain areas like the Atlantic provinces and Quebec, and racialized older adults faced greater barriers to accessing needed care. Non-white Canadians aged 50+ (59%) were less likely to have a primary care provider compared to their white counterparts (65%), and they also reported worse access to needed health care services (58% vs. 69% for white older adults). These insights underscore the need for tailored policy solutions that consider the unique needs of diverse older adult populations across Canada.

"Addressing these disparities is critical to ensuring equitable access to health care for all older adults in Canada. This report highlights that significant portions of the population are falling through the cracks. It's essential that we develop targeted strategies to close these gaps and create a more inclusive and responsive health care system that meets the needs of older Canadians," says Natalie Iciaszczyk, Program Manager, Survey Research of the NIA.






Initiatives to support recruitment and retention within the primary care sector and expanding team-based and community-based care models could provide relief to address health care access challenges. Virtual care, including care by non-physician providers, is a potential solution to meet growing demand. However, more research and consideration are needed to better understand the extent to which virtual care and non-physician health care providers can best support the health needs of Canadians.

"This report shines a spotlight on the urgent challenges older adults face in accessing the health care they need and deserve," says Alyssa Brierley, Executive Director of the NIA. "As we confront the realities of our ageing population, the health care system needs immediate reforms to provide more timely, equitable and comprehensive care for all older adults regardless of their gender, location or immigration status."

As Canada's population ages, health care reforms must be designed with older adults in mind. Future solutions must be responsive to the unique needs of this demographic to ensure health system sustainability and effectiveness.






About The National Institute on Ageing

The National Institute on Ageing (NIA) improves the lives of older adults and the systems that support them by convening stakeholders, conducting research, advancing policy solutions and practice innovations, sharing information and shifting attitudes. Our vision is a Canada where older adults feel valued, included, supported and better prepared to age with confidence.

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