

CONNECT 60+: A Wellness Program for Older Adults Delivered From a Community Hub

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What Is the Purpose of This Study/Review?

- The current study evaluates the effectiveness of the 9-week wellness program (CONNECT 60+) delivered from a community hub (either in person or online) for older adults living in the community on their exercise and social connections during a time of social isolation due to restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. CONNECT 60+ was designed and delivered using a community-based participatory research partnership between a research team of implementation scientists, a community-hub, and a community development organization.
- The community-based participatory research partnership had a collective intent to achieve a common goal of health and wellness for the local community by linking research with local action. The partnership called for mutual trust and genuine collaboration from the outset of the project and throughout each phase by including all partners and community hub staff, local volunteers, government representatives, and hub members to gain insights, disseminate, and build on community strengths.

What Is the Problem?

- Global population ageing has seen greater demand for community-based supports to promote and maintain the independence of older adults in their home and community.
- There is growing evidence that social isolation and low levels of exercise are associated with decline in quality of life and independence of older adults in the community.
- The nature of the COVID-19 pandemic has forced older adults to self-isolate at home rather than follow recommended wellness messages of getting out into the community and being physically and socially active.
- Connect Victoria Park took an active role to initiate this collaborative partnership with an intention to reach out to more community members through CONNECT 60+. There was an urgency to implement the wellness program with the emergence of self-imposed home isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- CONNECT 60+ was a novel wellness program, developed using a community-based participatory research approach. There is limited evidence about the effectiveness of community-based wellness programs in affecting older adults' health and wellness practices such as exercise and social connections during a time of imposed self-isolation due to COVID-19.

What Are the Findings?

- Older participants prioritized social connections as a wellness activity and increased the duration of exercise completed per week.
- The program circumvented social barriers to access an exercise routine in their local community and attaining recommended exercise levels. The choice to be trained and supported in utilizing online technology in this study was

an aspect of the community-based participatory approach that enabled participants to fully engage in their wellness activities during imposed social isolation conditions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The interaction of healthy ageing and technology represents an opportunity for all types of communities in various domains of urban and remote living to access the wellness program.

- The program aligned with international guidelines addressing healthy ageing and integrated care for older adults in the community and represents an easily accessible approach for older adults who may be isolated in their homes to engage wellness activities.
- CONNECT 60+ built on the strengths of the community members who were willing to connect on a weekly basis, to share common wellness interest, and support one another. The study endorses the use of a community-based participatory research partnership to promote engagement of older adults in a wellness program that meets their interests and needs within their local community.

Who Should Care Most?

- Local community healthcare organizations interested in providing an opportunity to bring health and prevention of age-related decline back into the hands of older people and their informal community supports.
- Researchers interested in using the community-based participatory research approach to enable genuine collaboration throughout research phases and generate real change to address the health and well-being of the global ageing population at the individual, community and system levels.

Recommendations for Action

- The study endorsed the wellness program delivered in person and online from a community hub to enable older adults to complete wellness activities, including exercise and socially connecting during a time of self-isolation due to the COVID pandemic.
- The community hub-based nature of the wellness program is a social investment in building and sustaining older adults to be active and engaged within their local community. Further exploration to understand the benefits of belonging to a community hub in undertaking wellness activities and the meaning of this experience might contribute to the future development of additional community support programs to meet local member needs, including for diverse communities living in rural and remote areas.
- The findings will be of interest to communities interested in combining knowledge and action to promote healthy ageing and the development of community programs to meet older local member needs.