

Health of Older People in the ACT 1999

Health Series
Number 28

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ACT Department of Health and Community Care**

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Foreword

I have seen the great potential of an age of ageing.

Kofi Annan, the Secretary General of the United Nations.

I am pleased to introduce the *ACT Older People's Health Survey 1999*.

The ACT Department of Health and Community Care commissioned the Survey to provide a clear view of the health of our older people. The information will be used to help everyone involved in planning and service delivery ensure that older people have ready access to services that meet their needs.

As many of you will recall, 1999 was the International Year of Older Persons – a year in which the world pledged to move “towards a society for all ages”.

The International Year of Older Persons was founded on the principles of independence, participation, care, self-fulfilment and dignity.

We are committed to ensuring these principles endure in the ACT. As a community we wish to continue to celebrate, value and encourage the achievements of our older citizens.

Good information is critical to our success in meeting these aims. The Survey contains this information - dispelling the myths of a frail old age plagued by ill health and instead highlighting the many positive aspects of ageing in the ACT.

The *ACT Older People's Health Survey 1999* paints a picture of older adults living independently in the community, with most having access to the care they need. Nearly one half of all older people reported that they believed their health to be ‘very good’ or excellent and the majority were able to carry out activities of daily living independently.

But, together with the positive aspects of ageing there are some challenges. The Survey shows some areas upon which we will need to focus in order to better support older people in maintaining independence and wellbeing. These areas include falls, physical activity, hearing and oral health.

I commend the survey to you and look forward to working with the community to further enhance the wellbeing of our older people and build on the potential of ageing in the ACT.



Dr Paul Dugdale
Chief Health Officer

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Health of Older People in the ACT: 1999 Survey Results

1 Summary

1.1 *Lifestyle*

- More than eight in ten males and less than half of all females reported being married. Over 40% of older people reported living alone.
- More than six in ten older people reported that they were financially comfortable, however nearly one third considered themselves to only have just enough money to get along.
- Seven out of ten older people reported being 'fairly to very' socially active and nearly all reported getting out of the home at least once a week.
- More than a quarter of all older people reported doing volunteer work.
- Nine per cent reported being responsible for caring for someone with a long-term illness or disability.
- Nine out of ten respondents reported being able to travel independently by car, bus or train.
- More than 90% of older people reported feeling safe in their home or neighbourhood 'all or most of the time'.
- The main fears for the future reported by older people were 'physical problems' for males and 'dependency' for females.

1.2 *Nutrition and physical activity*

- Over half of all older people reported eating the recommended daily quantity of fruit, one third reported eating the recommended daily quantity of vegetables.
- Over half of all older people reported being physically active at a level adequately beneficial to health. A similar proportion reported experiencing barriers to physical activity.

1.3 *Self rated health and well being*

- Over 40% of all older people reported their health to be 'very good' or 'excellent'.
- Over three-quarters of all older people reported feeling 'mostly happy' in the month prior to the survey, a similar proportion reported feeling 'mostly calm and peaceful'.
- More than one in ten older people had experienced some form of psychological distress in the four weeks prior to the survey.

1.4 Other health issues

1.4.1 Falls

- Over one-quarter of older people reported a fall in the previous 12 month period, with close to 25% per cent of those requiring medical treatment as a result.
- Falls were more common in females (32%) than males (24%).
- More than a quarter of all older people exercised to reduce the risk of falling.

1.4.2 Diabetes

- Nearly one in eight males and one in ten females reported receiving a diagnosis of diabetes.

1.4.3 Oral health

- Over 20% of older people reported having all their natural teeth missing and over 16% reported avoiding eating certain foods because of tooth or mouth problems.

1.4.4 Hearing and Vision

- Although nearly one in eight older people reported wearing a hearing aid, 76% rated their hearing as 'fair or poor'.
- Sixty-nine per cent of older people thought their eyesight for reading was 'fair or poor' and 69% said their long distance eyesight was 'fair or poor'.

1.5 Use of health and community services

- Nearly all respondents reported visiting a General Practitioner in the last 12 months.
- Only 10% had received a visit from a community nurse in the last 12 months.
- Seventy-eight per cent of older people reported having had a flu vaccination in the last 12 months.
- About one in eleven older people reported using community services, mainly for assistance with household duties

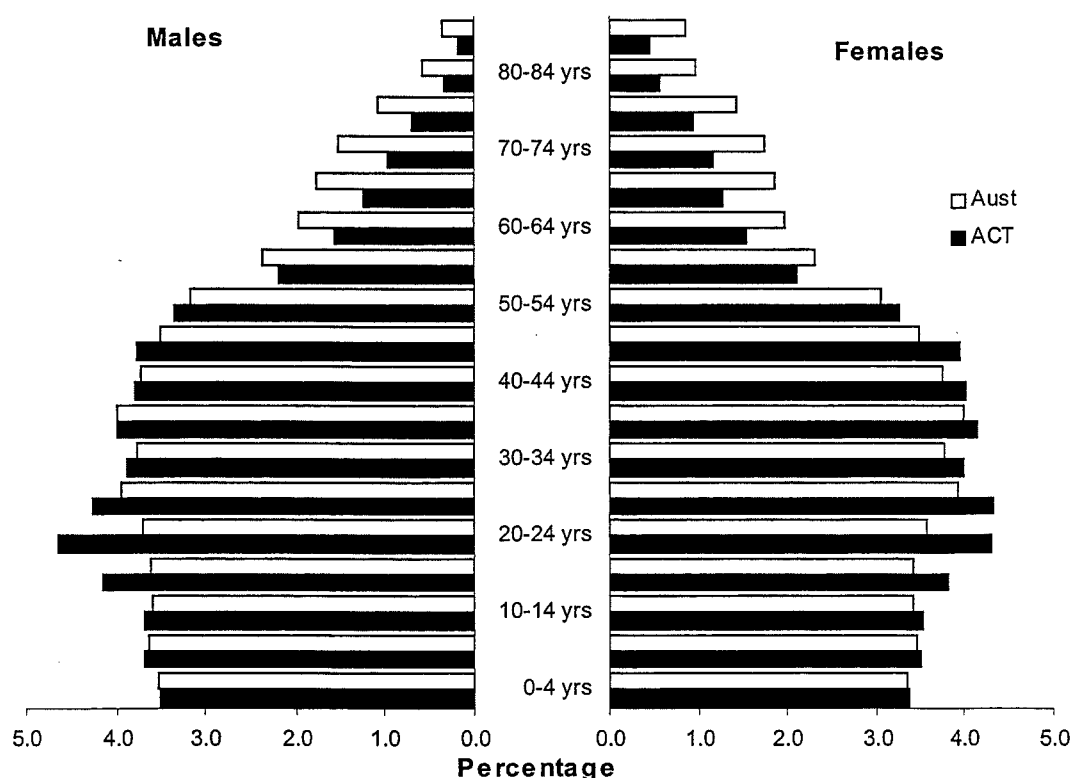
2 Introduction

The United Nations designated 1999 as the International Year of Older People (IYOP) and defined "older people" as people aged 50 years or more. The IYOP encouraged all people and their governments to focus on the contributions made by older people. It was a time to recognise the diverse aspirations, abilities and needs of these people and to promote a climate for structured planning to ensure that their needs are met now and in the future.

The ACT Government used the IYOP to focus on the development of quality services and strategies appropriate to the needs of an ageing population. As part of that focus, the ACT Department of Health and Community Care continued to develop a profile of the health needs of older people. A report titled "*Health Status of Older People in the ACT*" was released in October 1999 to inform planners and service providers in their pursuit of appropriate services to maximise both community and individual health and well-being.

The distribution of the population in the ACT is different to that of Australia, with higher proportions of people in the younger age groups from 0 to 54 years, as can be seen from Figure 1.

Figure 1: Estimated age distribution of the ACT & Australian populations for males & females, 30 June 1999



Source: ABS; Population by Age & Sex, Australian States & Territories June 1999, Cat. No. 3201.0

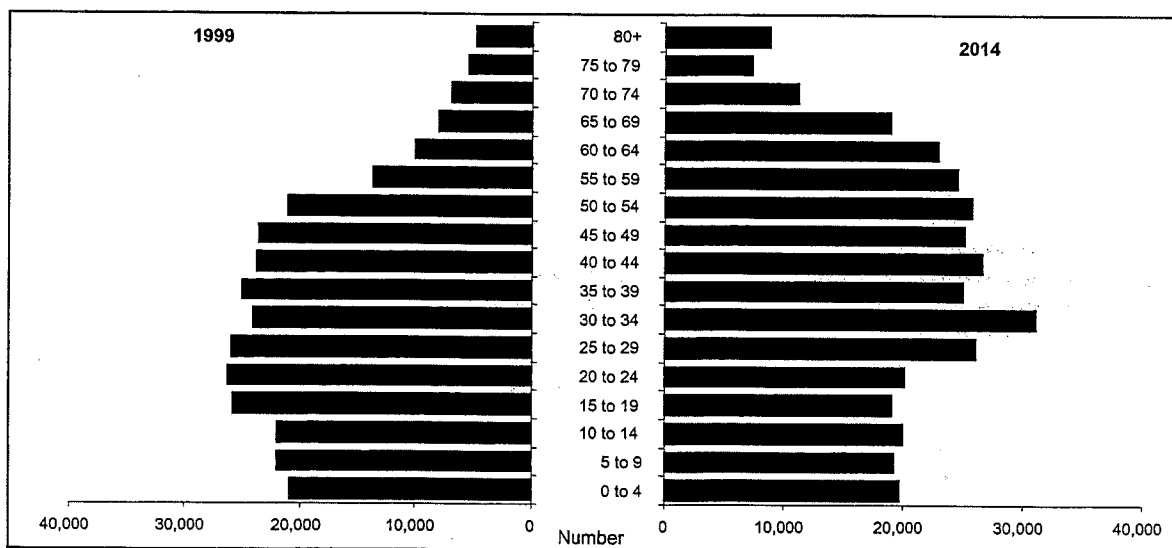
Currently suburbs established earlier in the ACT tend to have higher proportions of older people living in them.

The 1996 Census recorded the highest proportions of people over 65 years in the inner northern and southern suburbs such as Deakin (21%), Red Hill (19%), Campbell (17%), Ainslie (17%), Narrabundah (16%) and Yarralumla (15%). To some extent, these proportions reflect the concentration of nursing homes, hostels and retirement villages. Outer Belconnen, Gungahlin and Tuggeranong have low proportions of older people.¹

2.1 Population projections

In 1999, there were 69,800 ACT residents aged over 50 years (23% of the total ACT population) and 25,000 (8.1%) residents aged 65 years and over. Demographers estimate that by 2014 these proportions will increase to 34% and 13% respectively.² The following figure (refer Figure 2) shows how the number of people over 50 years is projected to rise in the next 12 years.

Figure 2: ACT population, by age groups, 1999 & projected to 2014



Source: Demographics ACT, Dept of Urban Services

The ACT Department of Health and Community Care commissioned the NSW Department of Health to include ACT residents in their Older People's Survey in 1999. Over 500 ACT people eligible to participate completed the extensive questionnaire using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI).

¹ ABS, *Social & Housing Characteristics for SLAs, ACT*, Catalogue No. 2015.8, 1996

² *Demographic Profile of Older People in Canberra*, Demographic ACT, Urban Services, 1999

3 Survey Methodology

3.1 Questionnaire Development

In late 1998, two consultants worked with a Technical Advisory Group including representatives from the NSW Health Department, Area Health Services, ACT Department of Health and Community Care, NSW Department of Ageing and Disability, the Council on the Ageing and clinicians to develop the survey questionnaire. Area Health Services were consulted to provide input into the topic areas and provide feedback on the draft questionnaire.

This process involved:

- Defining key information needs, potential survey topic areas and indicators of older people's health
- Reviewing existing survey questionnaires and other relevant resources
- Developing a draft questionnaire for piloting and comment
- Developing a final questionnaire for approval.

3.2 Questionnaire Translations

The questionnaire was translated into the four major languages of people aged 65 years and older (ie, Arabic, Chinese, Italian and Greek) to ensure that a large proportion of non-English speaking residents of NSW and the ACT were represented.

3.3 Target Population and sampling procedures

The target population for the survey was people aged 65 years and older who were residents of NSW and the ACT. The source population was NSW and ACT residents aged 65 years and older living in households with private telephones. The target sample for the survey comprised 500 people aged 65 years and older from each of the 17 NSW Health Areas and the ACT.

A stratified two stage cluster sample design was used, with simple random sampling of clusters (household telephone numbers) within each Area (stratum) and weighted random sampling of population elements (resident who is aged 65 years or more) within each cluster.

The sampling frame for household selection in the survey comprised randomly sorted lists of all telephone numbers listed in the Electronic White Pages. Telephone numbers were assigned to each Area by geo-coding the addresses and then assigning each record (containing an address, phone number and name) to an Area. Samples were drawn from these randomly ordered phone number lists for each Area to allow for 500 completed interviews of people aged 65 years and older.

3.4 Population Estimates

The precision of the estimates for a sample of 500 older people in each area is adequate to monitor their health. For example, if the estimated prevalence of moderate or vigorous physical activity is 25%, the 95% confidence limits around this estimate would be +/- 3.8%, (ie. we would be 95% certain that the true prevalence lay between 21% and 29%). The survey sample for the ACT was weighted to ACT population figures for 1999.

3.5 Survey Limitations

This survey did not attempt to report on individuals residing in nursing homes, hostels and other private care facilities. Given that during 1999, approximately 10% of people aged 70 years and over living in the ACT resided in these facilities³, the omission of this group should be taken into account when interpreting the survey results.

Proxy administered survey interviews were used when respondents were unable to participate due to illness or incapacity. There were 20 such respondents in the ACT survey. Due to the small number these responses are not included in the results and have not been reported separately. Further details will be provided on request.

³ Steering Committee for the Review of Commonwealth/State Service Provision (SCRCSSP) 2000, Report on Government Services 2000, AusInfo, Canberra.

4 Results

The following results are sourced solely from the ACT Older People's Health Survey 1999.

4.1 Lifestyle

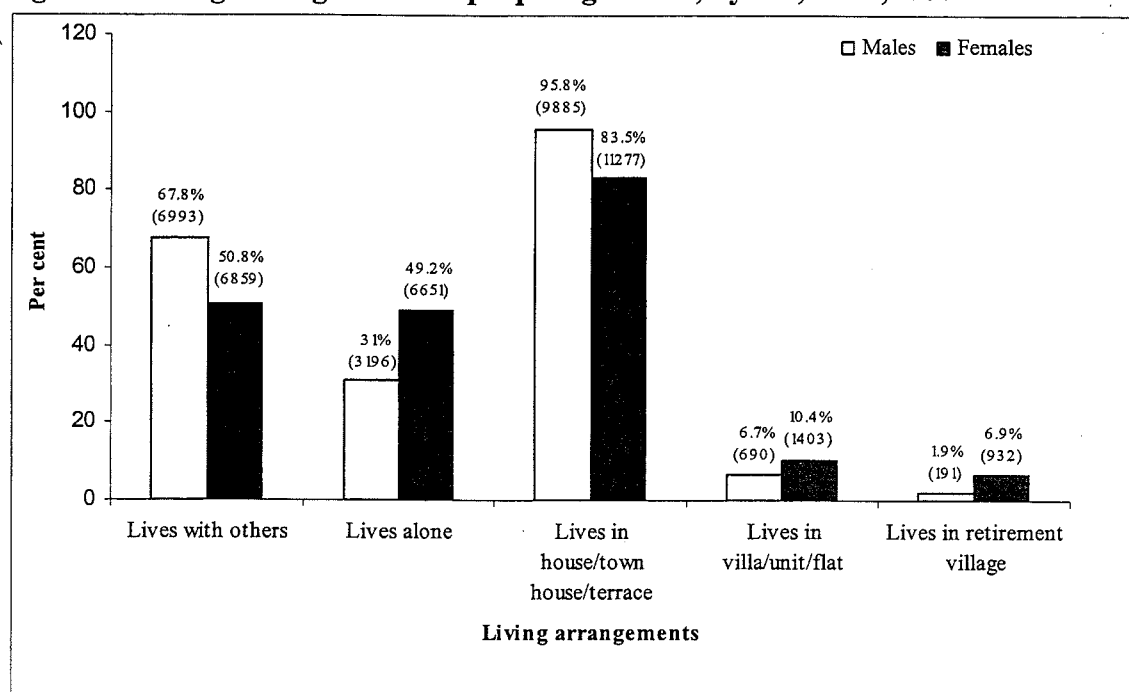
4.1.1 Living arrangements

More than 8 in 10 males (83%) and less than half of all females (48%) were married. Nearly 40% of females were widowed, compared to 10.9% of males. Only 2.5% of males and 5.6% of females were divorced.

Over 40% of older people reported living alone. Females were just as likely to be living alone as with others, while males were more likely to be living with others (see Figure 3). The majority of older people living with others lived with a spouse (58%), males (72%) were more likely to be living with a spouse than females (47%), probably as a result of longer life expectancy among women. A small percentage lived with their children (8.4%) or other relatives (2.1%).

The majority of older people (89%) lived in a house/townhouse/terrace. The next most common type of housing was a villa/unit/flat (8.8%) or retirement village (4.7%).

Figure 3: Living arrangements of people aged 65 +, by sex, ACT, 1999

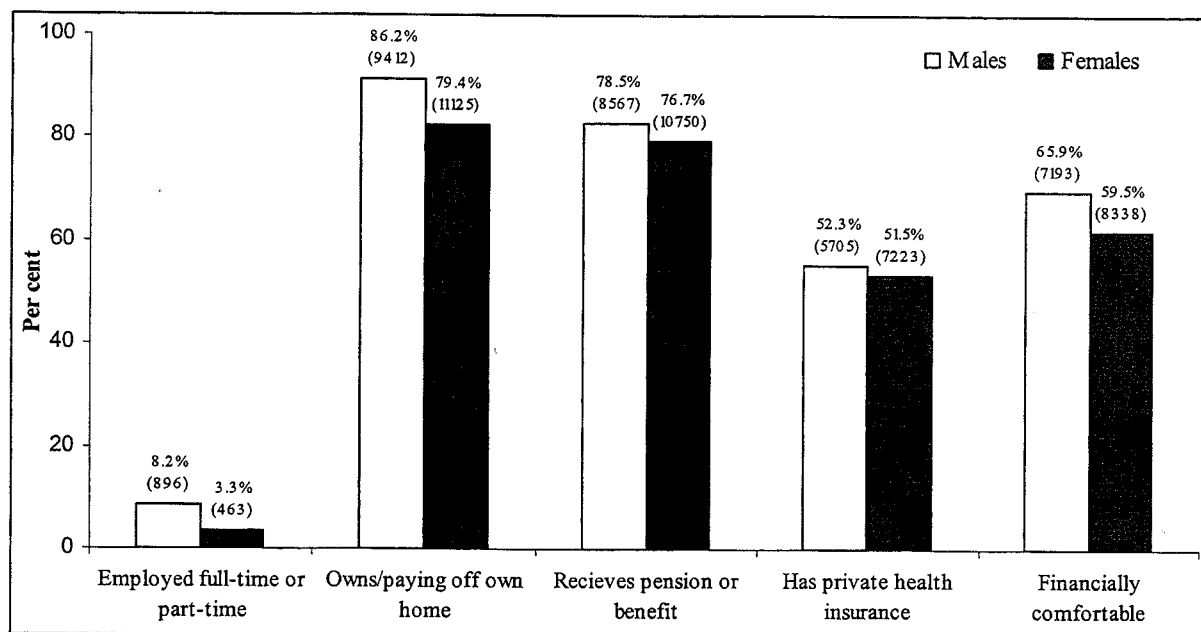


Note: Numbers in brackets refer to estimated number of people living in the ACT in 1999.

Only 5.5% of people aged 65 + were employed on either a full-time or part-time basis with males more than twice as likely (8.7%) than females (3.4%) to be employed (see Figure 4). More than 8 in 10 older people (82%) either owned or were paying off their own home; 77% were in receipt of a pension or benefit and 52% had private health insurance.

Sixty-two per cent considered themselves to be 'financially comfortable'. However nearly one third (31%) considered themselves to only have just enough money to get along, with females (35%) more likely to report this than males (26%). Only 2.4% of older people considered themselves to not be able to make ends meet financially.

Figure 4: Employment, home ownership, and finances of people aged 65+, by sex, ACT, 1999



Note: Numbers in brackets refer to estimated number of people living in the ACT in 1999.

4.1.2 Social activities

Seven out of ten (71%) older people considered themselves to be 'fairly to very' socially active. Nearly three in ten (29%) reported not being 'very socially active' or 'not active at all'. Males had a greater tendency towards social inactivity (32%) than females (16%), especially males aged 75 years and over (42%).

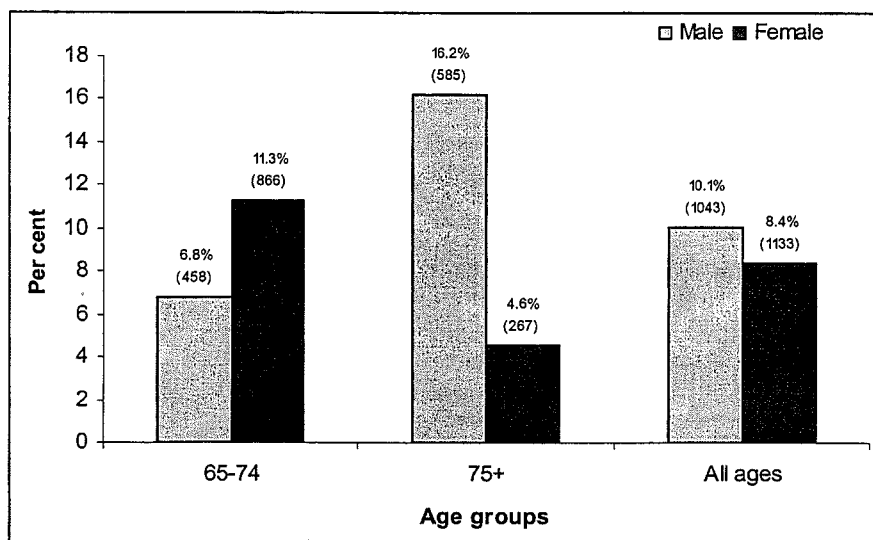
Nearly all respondents (97%) reported getting out of the home at least once a week, with the majority getting out every day (58%). More females (89%) than males (84%) reporting having someone to confide in. More than one quarter (28%) of all older people reported doing volunteer work for an organisation, with slightly more males (31%) reporting this than females (26%).

4.1.3 Older People as Carers

Slightly less than one in ten older people (9.1%) reported being responsible for caring for someone with a long-term illness, disability or other problem. Overall, males (10%) were slightly more likely to report being carers than females (8.4%). Males in older age groups (75+ years) were more likely to be carers (16.2%) than females of the same age (4.6%). The

reverse was the case in younger age groups with females aged 65-74 years more likely to be carers (11%) than males (6.8%) (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Older people who care for someone with a long term illness or disability by sex and age group, ACT, 1999



Note: Numbers in brackets refer to estimated number of people living in the ACT in 1999.

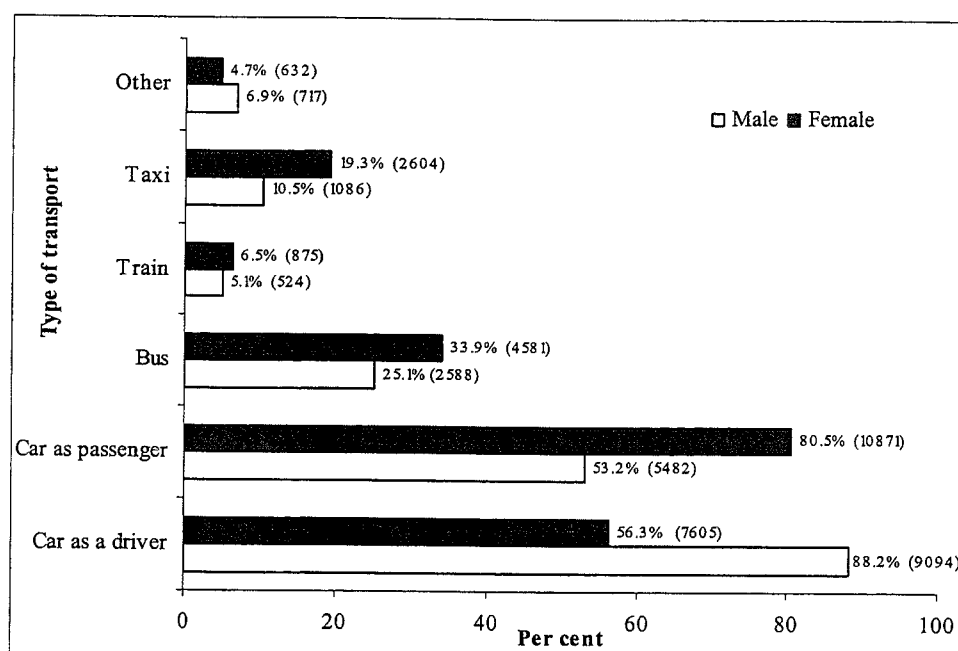
Nearly all carers were caring for a spouse (males 77%; females 89%). The reason for care in most cases (82%) was a physical illness or disability.

Nine out of ten carers (90%) reported receiving no carer support in the last 4 weeks, however less than one in five (19%) reported needing more help as a carer. Of those needing more help as a carer, 'help around the home and garden' was regarded as the most needed help (63%). This was followed by 'help with household duties' (37%).

4.1.4 Transport

Nine out of ten older people reported being able to travel independently by car, taxi, bus or train (90%). Females aged 75 years and over were less likely (23%) to travel independently than males (77%).

Figure 6: Main means of transport for people aged 65 +, by sex, ACT, 1999



Note: Numbers in brackets refer to estimated number of people living in the ACT in 1999.

The principal means of transport (see Figure 6) for males was as a driver in a car (88%), while for females it was as a passenger in a car (80%). Five percent of older people reported using community service transport.

4.1.5 Safety

Nearly all older people (95%) reported 'feeling safe all or most of the time' in their home during the day, with males slightly more likely (98%) to report this than females (94%).

Similarly more than 9 out of 10 older people (93%) reported 'feeling safe all or most of the time' in their neighbourhood or local area with males (94%) slightly higher than females.

4.1.6 Hopes and fears

The survey attempted to gauge older people's general concerns and hopes with regard to the future. Over half of older people reported that their main fear for the future was for 'themselves' (males 54%; females 62%). For males this included, 'physical problems' (38%), 'dependency – not being able to cope on own or look after self' (22%), and 'finances' (8.1%). For females it was 'dependency' (42%), 'physical problems' (31%) and 'being placed in a nursing home' (5.5%).

Other fears included those for 'other people in general' (11%) and those for 'family, friends or significant others' (6.5%). Nearly 1 in 5 (19%) reported having 'no fear for the future at all'.

With regard to 'hopes held for the future' the theme for the majority concerned 'hopes for the self' (66%); including 'staying healthy and free from disability' (49%); 'continuing to live as they do now' (8.9%); and 'living a long life' (8.7%). Other hopes concerned the 'general world' (12%) and the 'family' (12%).

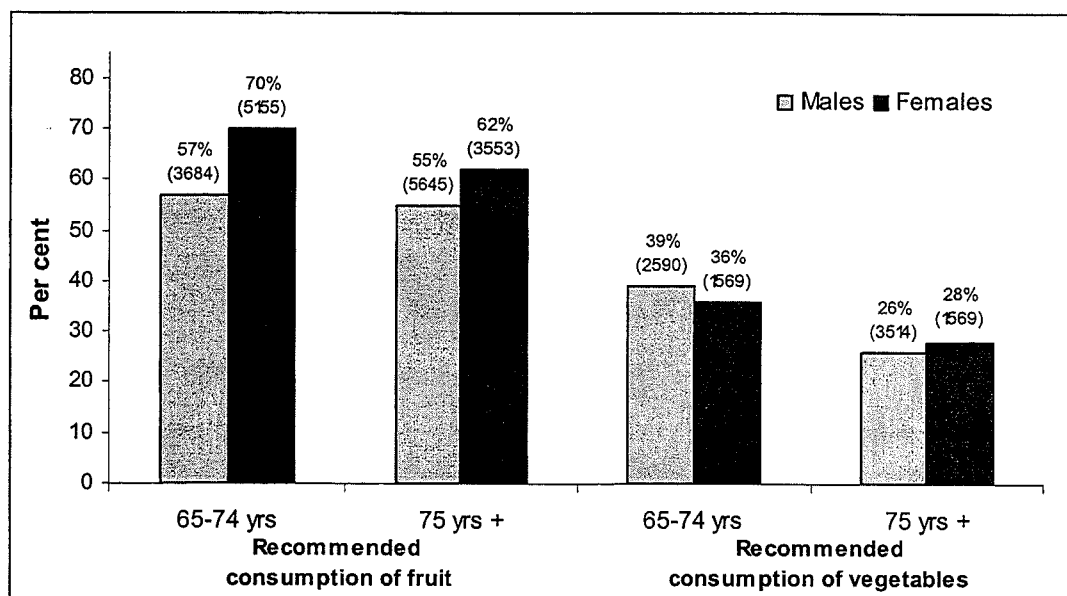
4.2 Nutrition

The recommended daily quantity of vegetables and fruit is four to five servings (300-375 grams) per day of vegetables and at least two servings (300 grams) per day of fruit⁴.

In general, more than half (59%) of all older people reported eating the recommended daily quantity of fruit (see Figure 7). Only one third (33%) reported eating the recommended daily quantity of vegetables.

There was little difference between males and females with regard to their vegetable intake, however with regard to fruit intake, females (62%) were more likely to be eating the recommended daily quantity than males (54%).

Figure 7: Consumption of the recommended daily quantity of fruit and vegetable for people aged 65 +, by sex and age group, ACT, 1999



Note: Numbers in brackets refer to estimated number of people living in the ACT in 1999.

⁴ Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care. The Australian Guide to Healthy Eating - Background information for nutrition educators. Canberra: Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, 1998.

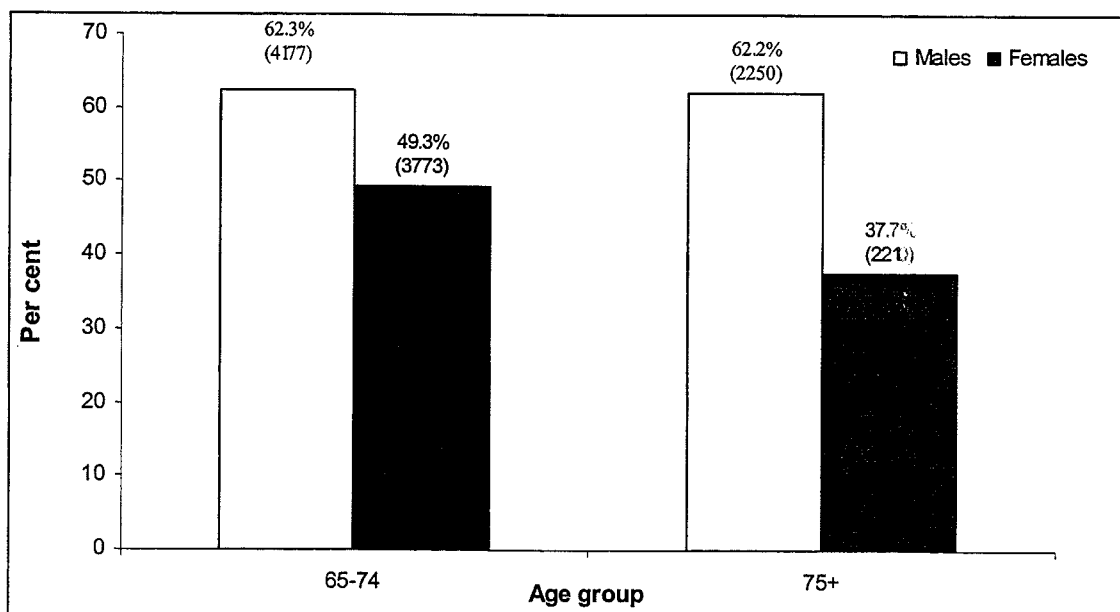
4.3 Physical Activity

Adequate physical activity in this report is defined as doing at least 30 minutes of walking or moderate/vigorous physical activity on at least five days in one week.

Over one half of all older people reported being physically active at a level adequately beneficial to health (see Figure 8). Males were more active, with 62% partaking in adequate physical activity compared to 44.3% of females. Females aged 75 years and over were less likely (38%) than females aged 65-74 (49%) to undertake adequate physical activity.

Over half (56%) of all older people surveyed were aware of exercise campaigns. A similar proportion (52%) reported barriers to physical activity. The main barrier reported was health problems (35%). This was especially the case for women aged 75 years and over (41%).

Figure 8: Adequate physical activity for people aged 65+ by sex and age group, ACT, 1999



Note: Numbers in brackets refer to estimated number of people living in the ACT in 1999.

4.4 Self-Rated Health and Well Being

More than 4 in 10 people aged 65 years and over in the ACT rated their health as 'very good or excellent' in 1999. Around 21% of males and 25% of females rated their health as 'fair or poor' (see Table 1). Males (37%) were more likely to rate their health as 'good' than females (31.8%). Females (43%) were slightly more likely to rate their health as 'very good or excellent' than males (42%).

Table 1: Self-rated health, people aged 65+, by age group and sex, ACT, 1999

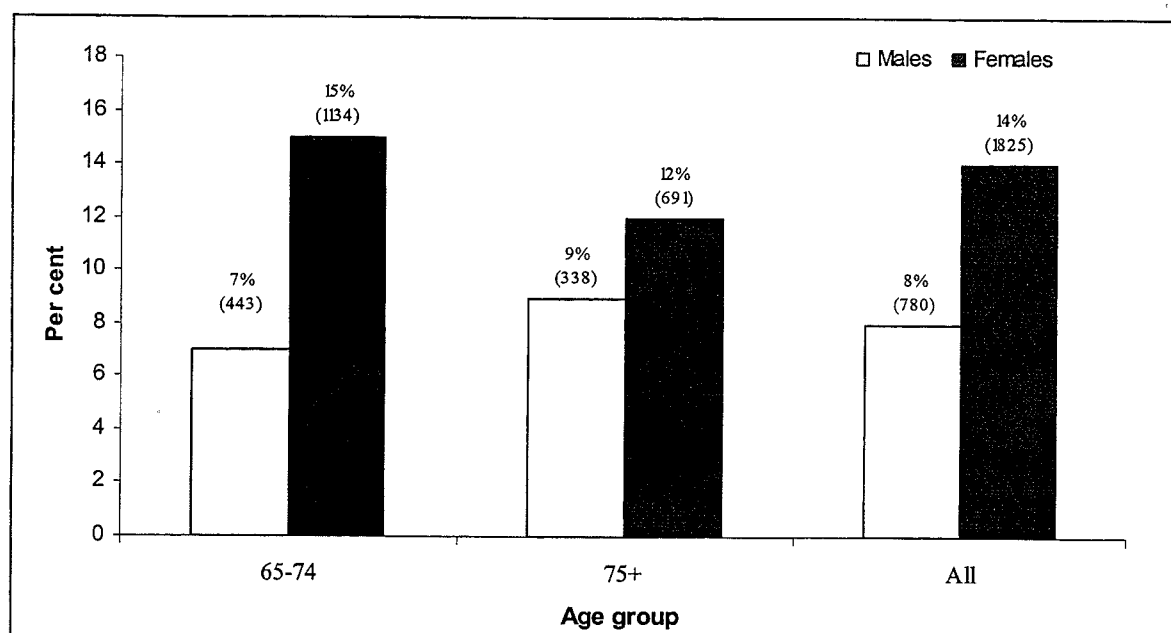
	65-74		75+		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Males						
Very good or excellent	3128	47.2	1150	31.8	4278	41.7
Good	2397	36.1	1397	38.6	3794	37.0
Fair or poor	1109	16.7	1068	29.5	2177	21.2
Total	6634	100.0	3615	100.0	10248	100.0
Females						
Very good or excellent	3476	45.7	2326	39.6	5801	43.2
Good	2403	31.6	1866	31.8	4269	31.8
Fair or poor	1735	22.8	1678	28.6	3363	25.0
Total	7614	100.0	5870	100.0	13433	100.0

Note: Numbers are estimated people aged 65+ residents in the ACT 1999.

The majority of older people reported feeling 'mostly happy' in the four weeks prior to the survey (males 76%; females 76%). Similarly, the majority reported feeling 'mostly calm and peaceful' during the same period (males 73%; females 61%). Less than 5% of older people reported feeling 'mostly bored' (4.6%), 2.3% reported feeling 'mostly lonely' and 2.9%, 'mostly depressed'.

Females aged 75 years or more were almost twice as likely to have felt 'mostly depressed' in the last four weeks (4.4%) than males of the same age group (2.7%).

Figure 9: Psychological distress (K6 score 60 or more) for people aged 65+, by age group and sex, ACT, 1999



Note: Numbers in brackets refer to estimated number of people living in the ACT in 1999.

Note: The K6 consists of six questions about the level of anxiety and depressive symptoms in the most recent four-week period. Individuals receiving a score of over 60 for these questions were assessed as suffering from psychological distress in the four weeks prior to interview.

More than one in 10 older people experienced psychological distress in the four weeks prior to the survey. Figure 9 shows this to be nearly twice as likely for females (14%) than males (8%), especially females aged 65-74 years (15%).

4.5 Activities of Daily Living

Of all respondents, 11% reported using a cane or walking stick, 3.2% a walker or frame and 1.7% a wheelchair. The majority of older people were able to carry out activities of daily living independently.

A higher proportion of males compared to females were able to carry out 'household duties', 'home maintenance/gardening', and 'cutting their toenails' on their own (see Table 2).

Table 2: Activities of daily living, by persons aged 65+, by age group and sex, ACT, 1999

Activities of Daily Living	Male			Female		
	65-74	75+	All	65-75	75+	All
Does not need help with personal care	96.8	95.6	96.4	100.0	97.2	98.8
Does household duties on own	93.1	90.2	92.1	89.7	76.8	84.1
Prepares meals on own	93.1	89.4	91.8	98.5	92.7	96.0
Does home maintenance/gardening on own	89.9	70.7	83.2	73.4	53.4	64.7
Does not need help with cutting toenails	86.4	71.2	81.0	79.5	50.8	67.1

Over a quarter of older people reported experiencing 'pain that lasted 3 months or more' 6 months prior to the interview. One in twelve (8.4%) rated the intensity of their pain as 'strong' or 'severe', 13% as 'moderate', and 4.5% as 'weak' or 'mild'. In the last 6 months, 7.7% of older people reported experiencing pain that interfered with their daily activities 'quite a lot' or 'extremely', 6.9% reported 'moderate' interference, and 12% reported 'weak' or 'mild' interference.

4.6 Other Health Issues

4.6.1 Falls

Over one quarter (29%) of older people in the ACT reported having fallen in the previous 12 months (see Table 3). Females (32%) reported more falls than males (24%). Twenty-five percent of all falls required medical treatment.

Females aged between 65-74 years were more than twice as likely to report a fall requiring medical attention than males of the same age.

Table 3: Any fall in the last 12 months, by age group and sex, ACT, 1999

Age (years)	Sex	Estimated No.	%	Requiring medical treatment No.	%
65-74	Males	1516	22.6	205	13.5
	Females	2425	31.7	715	29.5
	Persons	3941	27.5	920	23.4
75+	Males	962	26.6	208	21.6
	Females	1909	32.6	566	29.6
	Persons	2871	30.3	774	27.0
All	Males	2477	24.0	413	16.7
	Females	4334	32.1	1281	29.6
	Persons	6811	28.6	1694	24.9

Note: Numbers are estimated people aged 65+ residents in the ACT 1999.

Over one quarter (30%) of all respondents reported a fear of falling, increasing from 26.4% among 65-74 year olds to 34% among those aged 75 years and over (see Table 4). Females were more than twice as likely to report a fear of falling (F:M ratio 2.4).

Table 4: Fear of falling by age group and sex, ACT, 1999

Age group	Sex	Afraid of falling	
		No.	%
65-74 years	Males	945	14.2
	Females	2826	36.9
	Persons	3771	26.4
75+ years	Males	750	20.7
	Females	2492	42.5
	Persons	3242	34.2
All	Males	1696	16.5
	Females	5318	39.4
	Persons	7014	29.5

Note: Numbers are estimated people aged 65+ residents in the ACT 1999.

Overall 7.9% of respondents reported using a personal alert or alarm in case they had a fall or other emergency. Females aged 75 years and over were over three times (11%) more likely to use an alarm than males (3.4%) of the same age.

Overall the proportion of respondents already undertaking exercise to reduce the risk of falling was similar (approximately 30%) for males and females. Females were more likely to consider exercising to reduce the chances of falling than males, particularly in the 65-74 year age group (see Table 5).

Table 5: Respondents who would consider exercising to reduce risk of falling, ACT, 1999

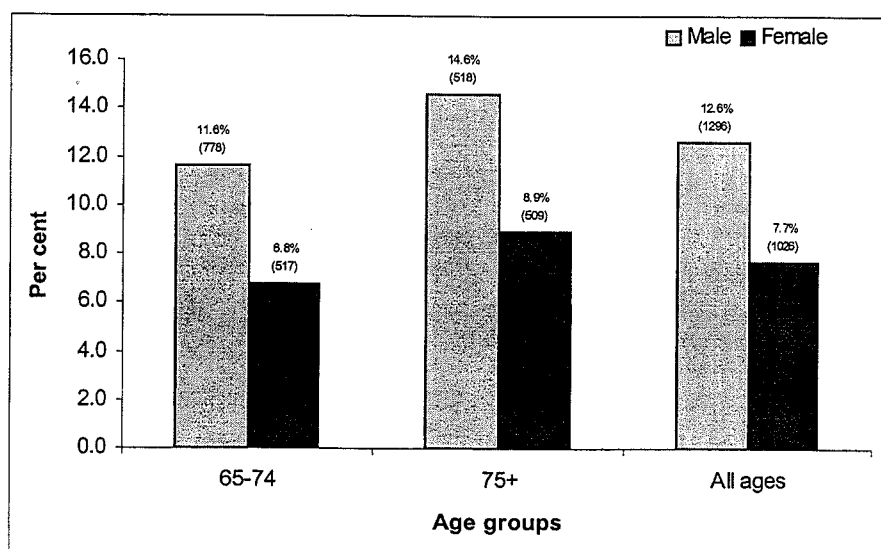
Age group	Sex	Consider exercising to reduce risk of falling	
		No.	%
65-74 years	Males	1822	27.7
	Females	3241	43.8
	Persons	5063	36.3
75+ years	Males	960	27.4
	Females	1679	29.3
	Persons	2639	28.6
All	Males	2783	27.6
	Females	4921	37.5
	Persons	7704	33.2

Note: Numbers are estimated people aged 65+ residents in the ACT 1999.

4.6.2 Diabetes

A higher proportion of males (12.6%) than females (7.7%) reported having been diagnosed with diabetes by a doctor (see Figure 10). The likelihood of being diagnosed with diabetes increased slightly with age, from 9.0% among 65-74 year olds to 11.1% for those aged 75 years and over.

Figure 10: Older people reporting a diagnosis of diabetes, aged 65 +, by age and sex, ACT, 1999

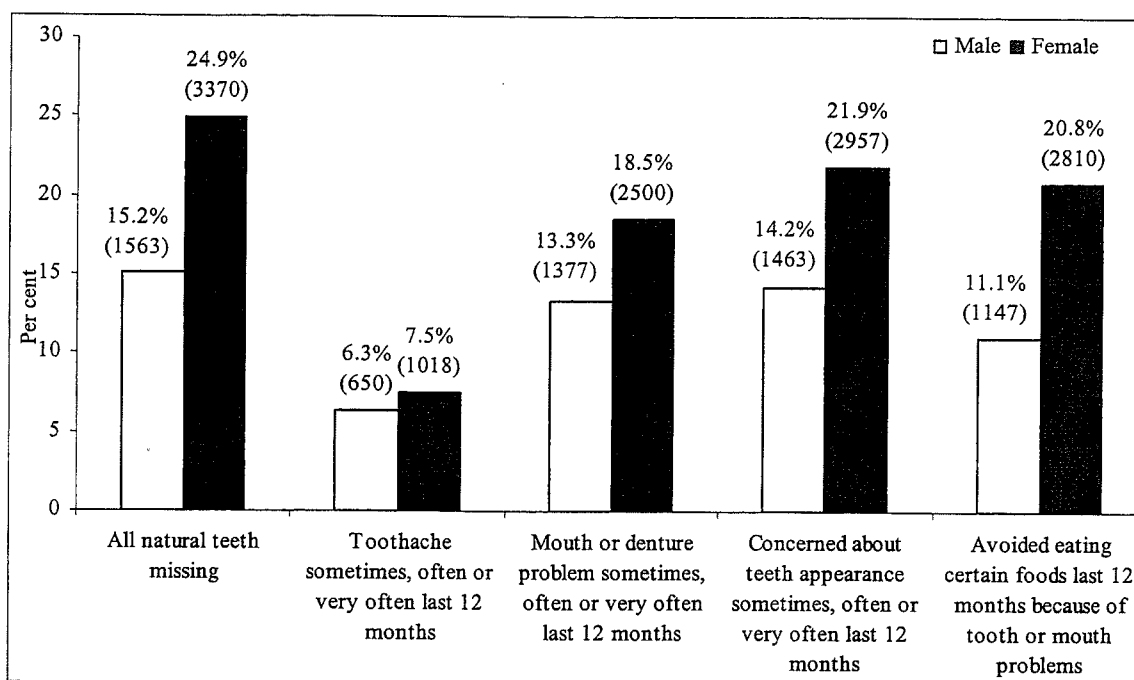


Note: Numbers in brackets are estimated people aged 65+ residents in the ACT 1999.

4.6.3 Oral Health

In 1999, 21% of older people reported edentulism (all natural teeth missing). One in six (17%) older people avoided eating certain foods because of tooth or mouth problems and 16% of older people reported mouth and denture problems in the last 12 months. Overall, females were more likely to report experiencing oral health problems than males (see Figure 11).

Figure 11: Oral Health, by sex, ACT, 1999



Note: Numbers in brackets are estimated people aged 65+ residents in the ACT 1999.

4.6.4 Hearing and Vision

Nearly one in eight (12%) older people reported wearing a hearing aid and 76% rated their hearing as 'fair or poor'.

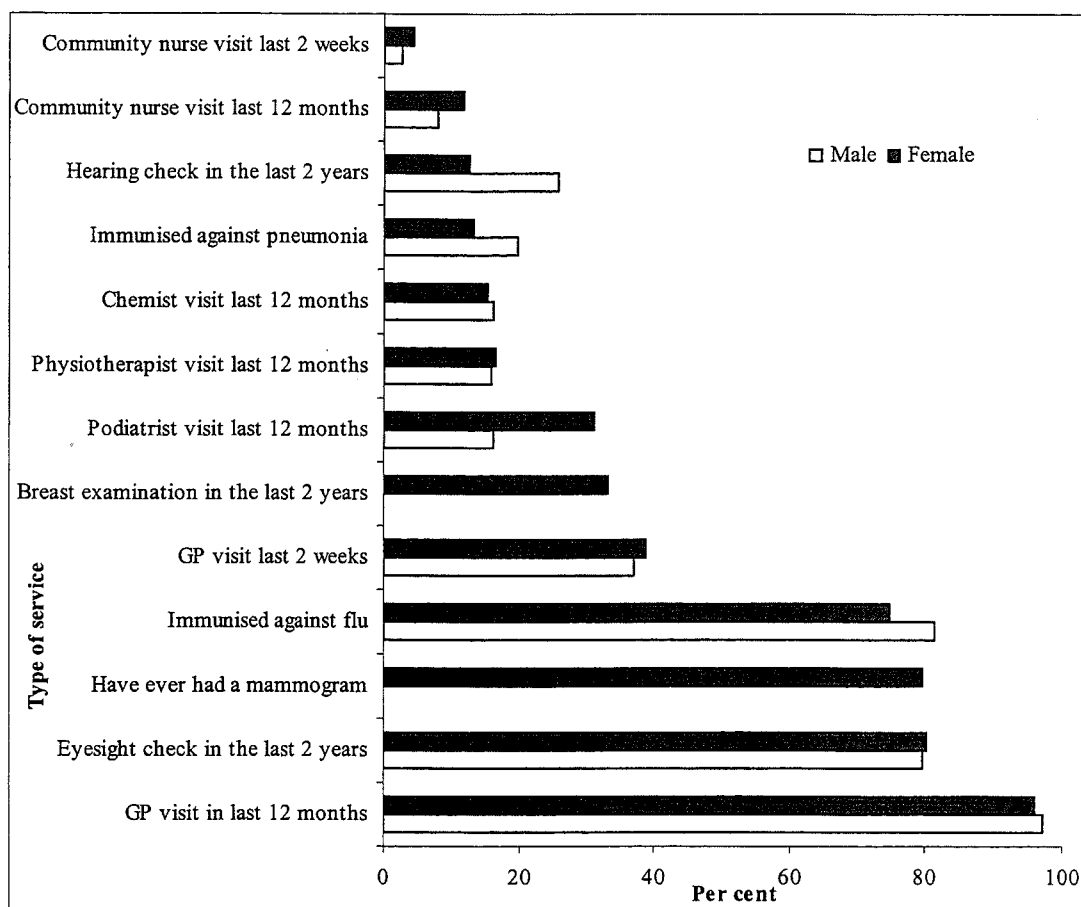
Ninety-four per cent of older people reported wearing glasses for reading and 60% required glasses for distance vision. Self-rated eyesight for reading indicated that 68.7% of older people thought their eyesight was 'fair or poor' and 69% said their eyesight for long distance was 'fair or poor'.

4.7 Use of health and community services

Nearly all respondents (96%) reported visiting a General Practitioner in the last 12 months, with 38% doing so in the last 2 weeks. One in ten older people had received a visit from a community nurse in the last 12 months and only 3.8% in the last 2 weeks.

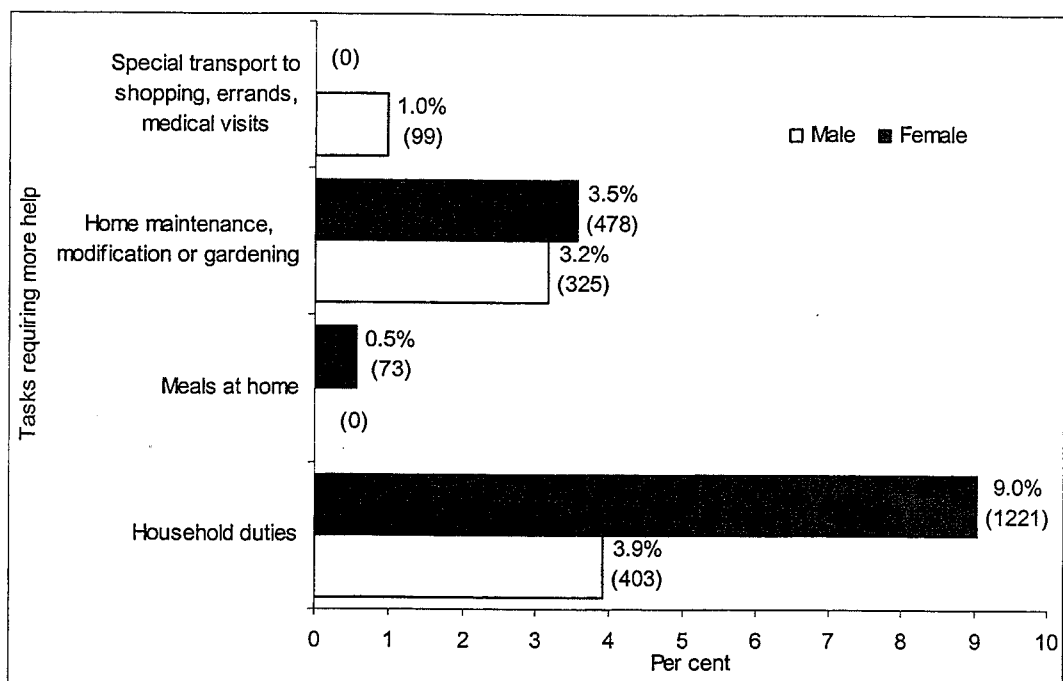
Males and females were similar in their use of most health services other than visiting a podiatrist, where nearly twice the proportion of females (31%) visited a podiatrist than males (16%) (refer Figure 12).

Figure 12: Type of Health Service Use, by sex, ACT, 1999



People aged 75 years and over were more likely to be (81%) vaccinated against the flu in the last 12 months than respondents' aged 65 to 74 years (75%). They were also twice as likely to have had their hearing checked within the last two years (25.2%) than their younger counterparts (14%). Females aged 75 years and over were less likely to have ever had a mammogram (39%) than females aged 65-74 years (49%).

Figure 13: Type of community services used, by sex, ACT, 1999



Note: Numbers in brackets are estimated people aged 65+ residents in the ACT 1999

About one in eleven older people reported using community services. This included help with household duties, personal care and other tasks at home. Household duties (6.8%) were the most common task mentioned by older people who required help. Over three-quarters of older people requiring help with household duties were female (refer Figure 13).

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