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Loneliness, ageism and mental wellbeing in nursing homes during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Background:

The measures imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially social distancing, had important effects on feelings of loneliness. The objective of this work is to assess the perception of loneliness in older adults living in nursing homes during the

pandemic, how it has changed during the pandemic and its explanatory factors.

Methods:

The data come from the cross-sectional project “Protective environments of the elderly in health crises”, carried out in the Community of Madrid (Spain) in 2021. The variables used were the frequency of feelings of loneliness and its change during the pandemic, as well as socio-demographic, health, emotional and contextual characteristics. Descriptive statistics and logistic regression analysis were calculated.

Results:

The sample consisted of 447 people; mean age was 83.8; 63.1% were women; half of the sample were widowed; 40% had an educative level lower than primary. Almost 3 out of 10 residents stated that they often or always/almost always felt alone. In the regression model, loneliness was negatively associated with age, number of medications, emotional

balance, coping ability, self-perception of aging, and engaging in rewarding activities; while having a low assessment of mobility in the residential environment was positively associated. In addition, 28% of the participants who declared loneliness, also felt lonelier than before the pandemic. The variables associated with change in feelings of loneliness were age, self-perception of aging and a low assessment of the residential environment.

Conclusions:

The restrictions on mobility and social relationships during the COVID-19 epidemic have affected older people who were living in residences, with an increase in the feeling of loneliness related to demographic, emotional and contextual variables. Interventions on the design of residential spaces can mitigate the effects of isolation and loneliness related to health crises such as COVID-19 pandemic.