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LIFESTYLES OF HIGHLY ACTIVE OLDER ADULTS BEFORE AND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A QUALITATIVE STUDY BASED ON THE SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL MODEL

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The purpose of this study is to explore the lifestyles and motivation of highly physically active older adults based on the socio-ecological model, both before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study seeks to understand the habits and environmental factors that may contribute to the physical well-being of physically active older individuals.

The data collection of this study was completed early in March 2020, right before the COVID-19 pandemic became a serious problem in the United States. Data was collected using 19 face-to-face one on one interviews and addressed PA using the socioecological model. All interviews were conducted by the same interviewer. A follow-up study was conducted in January 2021 with data collected via email from 13 out of the 19 individuals.

Participants expressed a variety of sources for motivation for PA including self-motivation, PA as a source of enjoyment, and the desire to avoid disability. Participants suggested that resources to increase PA among older adults starts with more educational initiatives about the health benefits of PA. Financial incentives may be an effective policy to promote PA among older adults. Having a connection to other highly physically active people is key for consistent PA for the participants. While the COVID-19 pandemic affected PA for the participants, they tried to maintain their PA levels overall. To continue promoting PA among older adults, it is important to have strategies that balance social distancing and PA opportunities.

The primary factor for PA is self-motivation. Other factors that contribute to PA include recreational facilities and social support from other highly active older adults. While the COVID-19 pandemic limited PA opportunities for participants, the motivation to stay physically active remained the same. The insight gained from this study provides ideas for how to promote PA among older adults in their later years.