



Participant Newsletter 2023–2024

Celebrating 20 Years of ELSA – Thanks from Andrew Steptoe

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The English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA) has reached an impressive milestone, celebrating 20 years of data collection. Over the past 20 years, the study has allowed us to dispel some of the myths about ageing and helped us uncover some serious and pressing issues affecting our ageing population. Thank you to all our participants to date for their continued support which has made this 20-year milestone possible and thanks in advance to our existing and new participants for your continued support to help us to ensure ELSA remains such a vital source of data on ageing in England.

Recently, we produced a special report to provide a snapshot of the 1,300 research publications that have used ELSA data. You can download the report from the ELSA website: www.elsa-project.ac.uk/celebrating-elsa. The web page, also features a special anniversary film with key members of the ELSA research team as well as some of our wonderful ELSA participants. We hope you enjoy the film and feel proud that your participation in the study makes such an important contribution to the lives of older people.

The eleventh wave of data collection will be starting soon and there are some new additions to look out for. This wave will involve a health visit as well as your standard interview. During the health visit we will ask your consent to collect blood and hair samples and take other measures including your blood pressure, height and weight, grip strength and lung function.

The strength of ELSA comes from these repeated measures taken over time. This allows us to look at the impact of government policies and assess how the lives of older people evolve. I want to say a huge thank you to you all for your continued dedication to ELSA and your pivotal role in casting light on every aspect of life after 50 now and in the years to come.



What's new for Wave 11?

The next wave of ELSA will run from Summer 2023 to Summer 2024. One of our interviewers will be in touch during this time.

We are looking forward to interviewing many of you in person. To give you as much choice as possible, we will still offer an option for you to have a video interview if you would like. We want to hear about the lives of everyone aged 50 and over and their partners. You might be retired, unemployed or still working nine to five. You could live alone or have a large family. You might be struggling financially or comfortably off. You could be feeling fit and healthy or dealing with health problems. Whatever your situation, your experiences are important to us. Even if your circumstances have not changed, it is still important we talk to you.

We will also be asking some of you to take part in a health visit from one of our biomedical fieldworkers. With your consent, they will take some measurements such as blood pressure and a blood sample. We can give you your blood pressure, height and weight measurements during the interview and we can send you the results of some of your blood tests afterwards.

Participation in both the interview and the health visit is voluntary but we hope that you do take part in this important study. For us to paint an accurate picture of our society, it is vital that we hear from as many people as possible, from all walks of life and with different states of health. We always take great care to protect the confidentiality of all the information and test results that we collect.

In 2024 we also plan to collect life history data from ELSA participants who have joined the study since Wave 3 (in 2006/7). This will be a separate web or telephone interview and will include questions about places of residence, work, partners and family, migration, health and health behaviours through the life course, childhood living conditions and childhood experiences. The data will allow future analyses of issues such as cognitive stimulation during work and early life experiences in relation to Alzheimer's

Disease risk. We last collected life histories data in 2006/7 and it helped us learn that staying employed for longer in later life is linked to better health outcomes for men and that childhood experiences and parenting styles influence women's reproductive health and longevity of life in both men and women¹.

Charity donations raised – thanks to you!

As you may know we offer a £20 gift voucher to say thank you for your participation in the study at each wave. Some of our participants at Wave 10 chose to donate the money to charity and across Wave 10, ELSA respondents donated a total of £10,315 to charities including Age UK, the British Heart Foundation, Action for Children and The National Emergencies Trust Coronavirus Appeal.



Recent Findings Health benefits of marriage in later life²

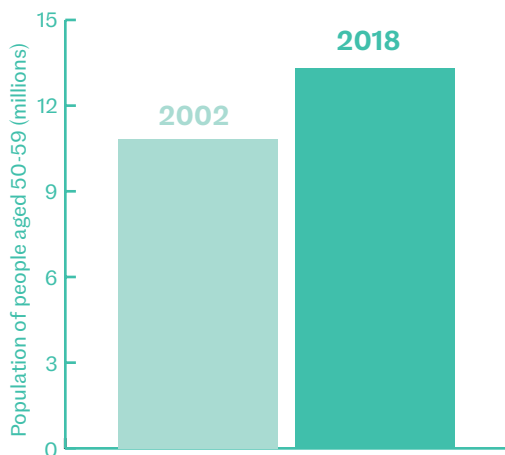
A research study showed that marriage influenced average blood sugar levels in English adults aged 50 years and older without pre-existing diabetes. This study has suggested that a decrease of 0.2% in the population average blood sugar levels would decrease excess mortality by 25%. Identifying and addressing barriers that prevent the formation of romantic partnerships for older adults that wish to pursue these relationships may have subsequent benefits for blood sugar levels in the population at risk for type 2 diabetes. These findings suggest that love has truly powerful health benefits in later life!



Changes in the Older Generation over the years³

The Centre for Ageing Better have used ELSA data to look at the differences between people in their 50s and 60s today compared to those who were the same age in 2002. They have found that the number of people within this age group is growing, alongside their diversity in terms of life circumstances like health and wealth. They found that:

- There has been an increase of 23% in the number of people aged 50-59 since 2002.



- One in five people in this generation will experience some sort of long-term problem such as loneliness or poor health.



- People from ethnic minority backgrounds (aged 50- 70) are more likely to be unable to meet current financial needs, compared to people from white backgrounds.



ELSA in the Media

Platinum Jubilee generation is 'the richest in history'
The Telegraph

Take up tennis, swimming or gardening to avoid muscle aches in old age, study suggests
The Independent

Being wealthy adds nine more healthy years of life, says study
The Guardian

Northerners more likely to develop hearing loss
The Telegraph

The impact of your five-a-day on dementia risk⁴

A study using data from ELSA participants has found that consuming five portions of fruit or vegetables a day was associated with a lower risk of dementia when the study looked at the ELSA data over a 10 year period. The risk levels were also dependent on the health and genetics of the individual.

1 Demakakos, P., Pashayan, N., Chrousos, G., Linara-Demakakou, E., Mishra, G. (2019). 'Childhood experiences of parenting and age at menarche, age at menopause and duration of reproductive lifespan: Evidence from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing'. *Maturitas*, 122, 66-72.

2 Ford, K. and Robitaille, A. (2023). 'How sweet is your love? Disentangling the role of marital status and quality on average glycemic levels among adults 50 years and older in the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing.' *BMJ Open Diabetes Research and Care*. 11.1.

3 Centre for Ageing Better. (2021). *Boom and bust? The last baby boomers and their prospects for later life.*

4 Francis, E., Cadar, D., Steptoe, A. and Ajnakina, O. (2022). 'Interplay between polygenic propensity for ageing-related traits and the consumption of fruits and vegetables on future dementia diagnosis'. *BMC Psychiatry*. 22.75.

Meet the Team

Ask a Biomedical Fieldworker

(Josephine Birley)

How long have you worked as a biomedical fieldworker for NatCen and how long have you worked on ELSA?

I have worked as a NatCen nurse for 30 years plus, in fact from the very start of the Health Survey for England (HSE). I was working part time when a patient who was an interviewer approached me to say that SCPR (NatCen's title in those days) were looking for nurses. I had taken part in some research projects in the past and found it interesting. I was interviewed by an area manager who explained the role and asked if I would also be prepared to supervise other nurses. I have worked on all NatCen projects over the years and on ELSA for several waves.

How have health visits changed over time?

Things were very different in those early days. No computers, all the work recorded on paper but more importantly no Sat Nav!! I was a competent driver but driving from Sheffield to Leeds, Bradford and beyond, often late at night was a challenge. I still have my A-Zs with highlighted routes care of my husband!!!

What is your favourite thing about your job?

I particularly enjoy ELSA as with other long-term studies, the respondents are usually very willing, very interested and often available during the day. I have moved house twice over my time with NatCen but have still had the experience of seeing some ELSA respondents more than once which is great. I have long retired from district nursing but have carried on working for NatCen. For me the job is flexible. It means I continue to make contact with the public and keep up my nursing skills particularly in phlebotomy. As a supervisor I enjoy my time with other nurses particularly new recruits. People ask me if I find the job boring or repetitive. No!! Every household and every respondent is different. Who knows when I will finish this part of my career. Maybe a bad winter when the driving is difficult but at the moment the sun's out so here I go again!!!



Ask an Interviewer (Julia Stephen)

How long have you worked as a NatCen interviewer and how long have you worked on ELSA?

I have worked for NatCen for over 20 years (it was going to be a temporary job after I was made redundant from Marks & Spencer Head Office!) and have worked on ELSA since the beginning. It is one of the main reasons it became a permanent job.

How has interviewing on ELSA changed over time?

The main difference for me is that now I am in my 60s I can empathise more with my respondents about our various aches and pains. It is thanks to one of my respondents, that I now take turmeric capsules for my arthritis.

What is your favourite thing about working on ELSA?

I love working on ELSA because of the continuity of going back every two years to see the same people and see how life changes for them as they get older. Another nice thing is the amount of people who say "Hello Julia" when I phone them because they have my number saved in their phone, it makes me feel like part of the family. It's also nice to catch up with people and find out how their families are doing. I had one couple who despaired of ever being grandparents because their daughter was a high-flying career woman. I wasn't even through the door when they told me that in the two years since I had last seen them, she had met someone, got married and had a baby. It was lovely to share in their joy.

Do you have any particularly memorable experiences of working on ELSA?

Obviously given the nature of the study I have lost some of my respondents over the years but it is good when you go back and see their husband or wife and they feel they can reminisce with you about their loved one.

What impact did the pandemic have on interviewing and did this have an impact on people's approach to surveys?

I know it is said that the pandemic has not made face-to-face interviewing any easier but this is not my experience of ELSA. If the previous interviewer has done a good job and made the respondents realise how special they are and what an important study this is worldwide, there is no problem getting an interview.



Moving house or changing your contact details? Please let us know.

You are a valuable and irreplaceable member of ELSA. We are very grateful for your continued support for the study. If you have changed your contact details recently, or have any questions, please let us know by emailing us at elsa@natcen.ac.uk or calling free on **0800 652 4574** (opening times are: Monday to Friday - 9am to 5pm).

