

## The Primary Care Team Report on Access to Primary Care

The focus of the Primary Care Team (PCT) of the Seniors Health Innovations Hub (SHIH) is to build awareness of the crisis in primary health care for older adults through various activities. For example, in June 2025 we hosted the Forum [Primary Care for Older Adults: An Urgent Need](#) that affirmed our focus on access to primary care for older adults.

In February 2026, the PCT emailed a questionnaire to its readership to learn more about their access to a primary care provider (family physician or nurse practitioner). Related issues such as satisfaction with care, barriers to care and, for those who were not connected, knowledge about how to access primary care were also explored.

### METHODS and FINDINGS

The invitation to complete the Primary Care Questionnaire (PCQ) was emailed to 563 individuals, 493 of whom were subscribers to the SHIH communications. Designed using the Google Form app, the questionnaire included 12 items, seven of which offered an open-ended comment section. Respondents were told that all questions were optional, the completion time would be 3-5 minutes and responses would be confidential. A reminder was sent out two weeks after the initial invitation.

#### Sample

Of the sample of 563 recipients, 238 completed the PCQ resulting in a response rate of 42%<sup>1</sup>. Item completion rate was high, at 94% or over for most items. The majority of respondents (90%) were 65 years or older and 9% were between 51-64 which is consistent with the demographics of our SHIH subscribers.

Age Categories	Respondents	No Primary Care	With Primary Care
Under 50	3		3
51 - 64	21	4	17
Over 65*	214	10	200

\* not all respondents answered all questions

#### Limitations

The PCQ was sent to a convenience non-randomized sample mainly comprised of SHIH email subscribers. Findings, though generally consistent with other reports, cannot be generalized to the wider population.

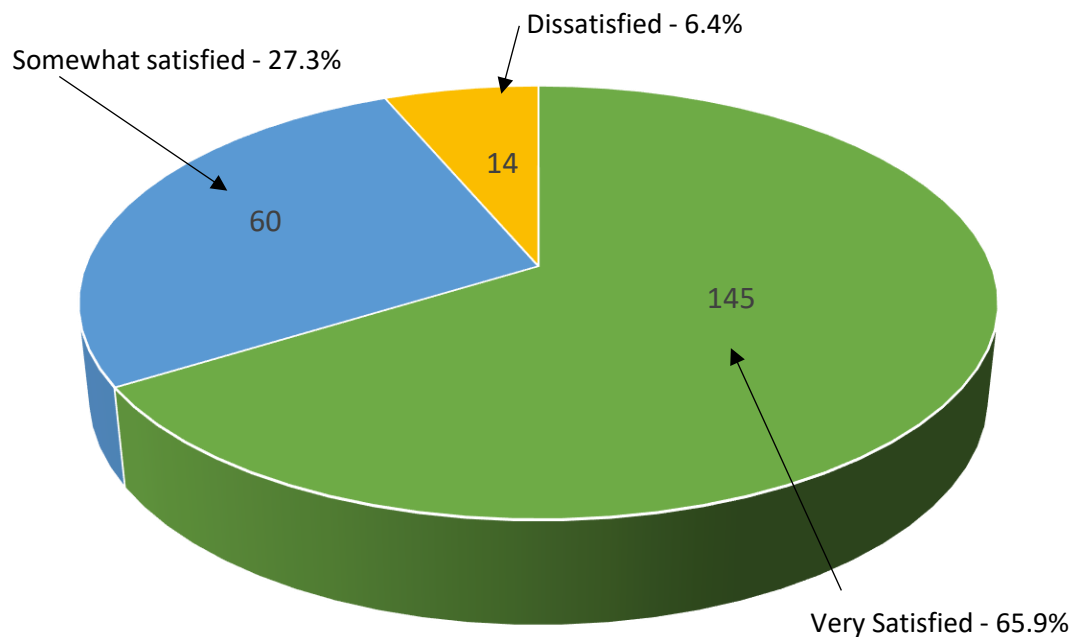
#### Respondents with a Primary Care Provider (PCP)

Access to Primary Care: Two hundred thirty-four (234) respondents answered the question “do you have a PCP (yes/no)”. The vast majority, that is 94% (n=220), had access to primary care. Most respondents with a PCP had been connected before 2025 (90%) and 10% more recently. Overall, 93% of those with a PCP were satisfied with their care.

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<sup>1</sup> The benchmark for a good response to a general survey is 10-30% with anything above 30% being excellent.  
<https://www.surveymonkey.com/curiosity/how-many-people-do-i-need-to-take-my-survey/>

How satisfied are you with your primary care provider (family physician or nurse practitioner)?



*not all respondents answered this question*

There were some barriers to care that are worth highlighting. Of the respondents who had a PCP and who completed the item on barriers to care, 91 (43%) reported there were “no barriers”. However, 120 (57%) did identify barriers, such as:

- appointment scheduling (30%)
- distance (17%)
- office hours (15%)
- front office administration (13%)
- concerns about the quality of their care (10%)

Most (71%) were not worried about the imminent retirement of their PCP and being able to find a replacement; however, 18% were concerned about this and another 11% offered additional comments on this item.

#### **Respondents with no Primary Care Provider (PCP)**

Those who did not have access to a PCP comprised a small group (n=14, 6%) but their responses provided insight into what other sources of health care they sought out, what their concerns were about not having primary care and the extent to which they were aware of provincial government resources, such as Health Care Connect, to help them find a PCP.

Their main concern about not having a PCP centred around lack of preventative care, monitoring to manage chronic illness and support for the aging process. This group sought health care or guidance from the following:

- drop-in clinics (69%)
- internet (62%)
- urgent care clinics (38%)
- pharmacists (38%)
- emergency room (31%)
- sought advice from family and/or friends (31%).

### Other Findings

All respondents were asked if they were aware of government resources regarding how to find a primary care provider including registering, as recommended, on Health Care Connect (HCC). Of the 85 respondents who answered this item, most (62%) were aware. Respondents commented they felt frustration, dissatisfaction and confusion about how HCC worked.

There was an opportunity to provide additional comments; 69 respondents (29%) provided these. The most frequent comment related to difficulty getting appointment times and delays for routine care (n=23). There were a range of positive comments reflecting satisfaction and appreciation about their current PCP (n=14). Another theme was the importance of a PCP for older adults with respect to aging and chronic conditions (n=9). There were very few comments about virtual care (n=3). Although respondents were not asked to identify if their PCP was a family physician or nurse practitioner, family physicians were most often mentioned in the comments sections which reflects the current model of practice.

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

Our Primary Care Team was struck by the high level of engagement by respondents with the issue of primary care, as indicated by the high rate of participation, item completion and the sheer volume of comments, whenever the opportunity was provided.

Lack of primary care has been widely identified as an urgent need, especially among older adults<sup>2</sup>. Among our respondents, there is a worry that not having access to primary care is a threat to their health. Findings from a 2024 international survey released by the Canadian Institute for Health Information (CIHI)<sup>3</sup> show that 8% of adults age 65 and older in Canada reported not having a primary care doctor which is slightly higher than the 6% reported by our respondents. According to a 2025 report in Canadian Family Physician, near-retirement family practitioners were caring for a higher proportion of patients aged 65 or older, and many with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, congestive heart failure, diabetes, and frailty<sup>4</sup>. Improving access to primary care will reduce the systemic burden and cost of those seeking care via urgent and emergency care clinics.

The importance of timely access to care has been noted by others. Findings from the above cited 2024 international survey noted that access to care for same-day, evenings or weekends was lower in Canada than in other countries. The authors noted the critical role primary care providers play in helping older adults manage

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.dlsph.utoronto.ca/2024/10/16/new-study-shows-significant-strain-on-health-care-system-over-the-next-two-decades>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cihi.ca/en/news/older-adults-in-canada-report-growing-challenges-in-accessing-primary-care-in-international-survey>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.uottawa.ca/about-us/news-all/more-family-doctors-near-retirement-raising-concern-about-future-primary-care>

complex physical and mental health needs including chronic conditions and multiple medications, echoing the concerns of the PCQ respondents.

Proximity to a PCP is important, especially for those who do not have access to a car or fear not being able to drive in the future. Transportation is a real barrier for older adults who have to bus a significant distance to get to their PCP. For those on limited incomes, taxis are often not an affordable option.

Some of the primary care models in Ontario – such as Family Health (FH) Groups, FH Teams and FH Organizations – are required to offer after-hours clinics including evenings and weekends that would improve timely access to primary care, one of the barriers identified by our respondents. “Primary care: right care, right place, right time”, envisioned by Ontario’s Primary Care Action Plan<sup>5</sup>, would reduce the problems of distance and transportation for access to primary care.

## NEXT STEPS

Our Primary Care Team has identified the following action items:

- Advocacy
  - Access to Primary Care Providers: Efforts to increase access need to be pursued. Ontario’s Primary Care Action Team promises to attach 100% of people in Ontario to a family physician or a primary care nurse practitioner working in a publicly funded team by 2029<sup>6</sup>. We will continue to advocate for primary care for older adults through collaboration with our community organizations applying for funding to extend and develop new primary care services. We will also continue to engage and inform our local Councillors, MPPs and MP;
  - Nurse Practitioners (NP). NPs deliver the full spectrum of publicly funded primary care in a variety of Ontario settings. As Registered Nurses with advanced education and clinical preparation, they manage age-related chronic diseases, co-morbidities and disabilities. NPs are well prepared to provide holistic care to our communities of older adults. We will continue to promote and educate our community about NPs scope of practice and their potential for expanding access to primary care for older adults;
- Health Care Connect (HCC). There is clearly a need to clarify the current role and operation of Ontario’s HCC system for attaching patients to primary care providers. We will relay the feedback received from our respondents to HCC as well as seek out and disseminate up-to-date information about how HCC is intended to work;
- Community Organizations. We have links to many organizations that are focused on the well-being of older adults, such as the Council on Aging. We will continue to strengthen our collaboration with them, for example, by sharing our Primary Care Questionnaire and this Report.

## THANK YOU

We wish to express our gratitude to each respondent who took the time to complete our Primary Care Questionnaire and, in particular, for adding personal comments. Your shared experiences and observations have provided us insight into the state of primary care in our community that will guide our future efforts.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontarios-primary-care-action-plan-january-2025>

<sup>6</sup> <https://news.ontario.ca/en/release/1006513/ontario-connecting-500000-more-people-to-a-family-doctor-and-primary-care-team>