

## INFO SHEET 7: CONDUCTING RESEARCH WITH VULNERABLE GROUPS: ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR ACHIEVING INFORMED CONSENT

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### WHY IS ETHICS IMPORTANT IN RESEARCH WITH OLDER PEOPLE WHO ARE CONSIDERED VULNERABLE?

The aim of ethical research is to ensure that participants are taking part willingly. This can be especially challenging when working with more vulnerable groups – those who may be compromised in their ability to provide truly informed and voluntary consent. In these cases, researchers need to make extra effort to avoid putting participants in situations which compromise their safety or dignity.

### INFORMED CONSENT

Informed consent is designed to be sure that participants really understand what they are signing up for – they understand the research, its risks and benefits, and are participating willingly.

Rights of research participants:

- To know that their decision to participate (or not) will not affect their services
- To have time to consider participation and ask questions before making a decision
- To withdraw or opt out of the study at any time (even after it has started)
- To be assured their consent is an on-going process, not just a form to be signed

### SENIORS AS A VULNERABLE GROUP

Age alone does not make someone more ‘vulnerable’. Researchers should consider these circumstances when working with older adults:

- Functional status – including intellectual capacity, literacy, educational level, etc
- Cognitive health – for example: confusion, trouble following the conversation, repeated misunderstandings of why the researcher is present, or mistaking them for someone else
- Physical changes in hearing, vision or mobility

Note that all adults (including those with cognitive impairments) are presumed to be competent to consent unless legally judged to be incompetent.

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Elder, K. & Retrum, J. (2012). Framework for Isolation in Adults Over 50. AARP Foundation. [https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/aarp\\_foundation/2012\\_PDFs/AARP-Foundation-Isolation-Framework-Report.pdf](https://www.aarp.org/content/dam/aarp/aarp_foundation/2012_PDFs/AARP-Foundation-Isolation-Framework-Report.pdf)

Canadian Institute of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, December 2014. [http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/pdf/eng/tcps2-2014/TCPS\\_2\\_FINAL\\_Web.pdf](http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/pdf/eng/tcps2-2014/TCPS_2_FINAL_Web.pdf)

Agency for Health Care Policy and Research (1998). Measures of Quality of Care for a Vulnerable Population. <http://grants.nih.gov/grants/guide/rfa-files/RFA-HS-99-001.html>

Learn more about the Hamilton Seniors Isolation Impact Plan:

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