

Using pulse oximeters in care homes for residents with COVID-19 and other conditions: a rapid mixed-methods evaluation

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Plain English summary

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Plain English summary

If a person's oxygen level in blood falls too low, this can be dangerous and require urgent hospital treatment. Our study was undertaken in March to May 2021. The aim of the study was to evaluate the use of a pulse oximeter with residents of care homes. A pulse oximeter is a small device that measures the level of oxygen in the blood. To help plan the study, we reviewed published work and asked the advice of care home managers and people who use care services. The evaluation has two main parts: (1) a survey sent to the managers of each care home in England and (2) interviews with managers and staff at six different care homes, as well as some NHS staff.

We received 232 survey responses, which is 1.5% of the 15,362 care homes in England. The low response rate is unsurprising given the great pressures on care home managers and staff at the time. The survey responses were received from different kinds of care homes and provide insights into the usefulness of pulse oximeters and of NHS help with using them. In 31 interviews, we spoke to staff at six care homes and a small number of NHS staff they interact with. Our findings are useful; however, the findings are based on a relatively small number of care homes that provided information and, therefore, the findings cannot be assumed to apply everywhere.

Pulse oximeters are commonly used in most care homes. Using pulse oximeters is reported by care home managers and staff to provide reassurance to residents and their families, and to staff. Usually, using pulse oximeters did not add to staff workload or stress levels. NHS support provided through the COVID Oximetry @home scheme was welcomed at the care homes receiving it, but over half of care homes replying to our survey had been unaware of the scheme.

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