



Impact of COVID-19 to People with Disabilities in Albania





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PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

This report aims to assess the level of access that People with Disabilities have to services and institutions during the pandemic period, as well as to analyze their economic and financial needs to cope with the consequences of the crisis caused by COVID-19.

ACRONYMS

PWD	People with disabilities
MSHMS	Ministry of Health and Social Protection
COVID-19	COVID - 19 is a disease caused by SARS - CoV-2, a virus from the coronavirus family, first discovered in China in December 2019.
TFL	Together for life Association
IPH	Institute of Public Health

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has put people around the world into great difficulty, increasing the hardships of vulnerable groups, especially People with Disabilities (PWDs). The challenges for people with disabilities and their families are being further deepened by COVID-19, and they, along with their families, will be among those most affected by this health crisis and its devastating social and economic impacts.

In terms of statistical data, across the country it turns out that 6.2% of Albanians have a disability. Data from the Ministry of Health and Social Protection show that the total number of people with disabilities is 74,194.

The number of carers is 19,874. Also, 74,350 People with Disabilities benefit from the social protection scheme for those unable to work.

Very little has been done to provide people with disabilities with the guidance and support needed to protect them during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, even though many are part of the high-risk group, warned the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Peoples with Disabilities, Catalina Devandas, on the 17th of March.

The media also reported on lack of access to health services, financial difficulties and other complex problems faced by people with disabilities, claiming that they were not part of the actions/decisions taken to help the target groups, especially in coping with COVID-19.

SURVEY OBJECTIVES

This survey aims to provide an analysis of the economic and health situation of people with disabilities during the COVID-19 period. This analysis can serve as a basis for the actions that the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs will take to support this category, in continuation of the efforts to manage the situation created by the new coronavirus.

LOCATION / COVERAGE

The survey was conducted in all 6 districts of the country:

- Durrës
- Elbasan
- Gjirokastër
- Korçë
- Shkodër
- Tiranë

METHODOLOGY

The survey was conducted in the form of a quantitative field survey. 360 individuals participated in the survey: 199, or 55.3%, of the participants were people with disabilities (PWDs) while the remaining 161 persons, or 44.7%, were guardians or parents of a person with disabilities

The methodology used gives us the opportunity to have an understanding of the current situation, in terms of reasoning, perceptions, attitudes and behaviors of people with disabilities, as key actors and, at the same time, the amount/volume of these results.

The questionnaire was designed to gather information on the perceptions, attitudes, behaviors and experiences of people with disabilities during the COVID-19 period.

The questionnaire contains:

- Filter questions for age and gender
- Economic situation during the COVID-19 period
- Health situation
- COVID-19 testing

TECHNICAL DETAILS OF QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH

“Together for Life” cooperated with the associations of People with Disabilities in the selected districts for the realization of this questionnaire. The persons selected by the associations themselves to engage were experienced in conducting the interviews.

The average duration of an interview was 15 minutes. All respondents were informed that their answers would remain completely anonymous and confidential, being processed for statistical insights. After a physical check of the questionnaires, data entry was performed by experienced operators using a special program (SPSS).



RESULTS

1.1. General information about research participants

360 individuals participated in the research: 199, or 55.3%, of the participants were people with disabilities (PWDs), while the remaining 161 persons, or 44.7%, were guardians or parents of a person with disabilities (Table 1).

Table 1. The role of study participants

Variable	Absolute number	Percentage
Role in the study		
I am a disabled person	199 *	55.3
I am a parent / caretaker of a person with disabilities	161	44.7

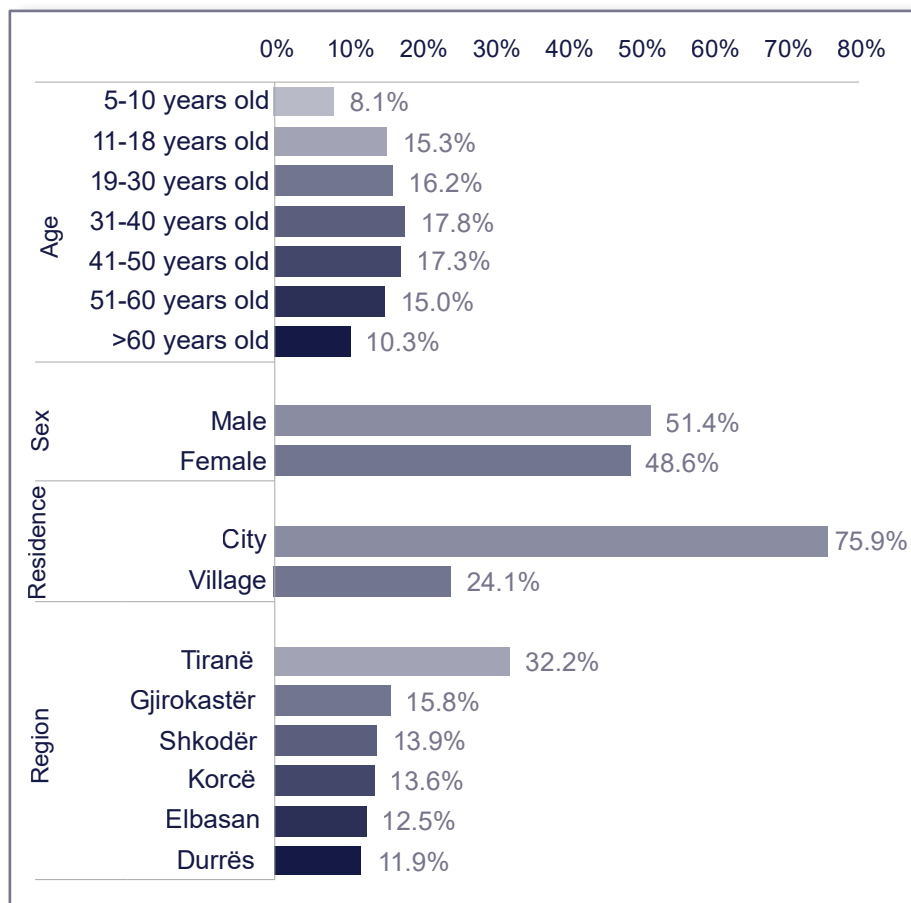
*Any discrepancy with the total number is due a to lack of information.

Basic socio-demographic data of peoples with disabilities participating in the study are presented in Table 2. About 24% of PWDs were 18 years old or younger at the time of the study, about 40% were 18-30 years old, and the rest were over 30 years old. About 51% of PWDs were male and about three quarters (76%) lived in urban areas. Similarly, 32.2% of PWDs interviewed lived in the Tirana Region, 11.9% in the Durrës Region, 13.9% in the Shkodra Region, 12.5% in the Elbasan Region, 13.6% in the Korca Region and 15.8% in the Gjirokastra Region (Table 2 and Graph 1).

Table 2. Basic characteristics of people with disabilities participating in the study

Variable	Absolute number	Percentage
Age		
5-10 years old	29 *	8.1
11-18 years old	55	15.3
19-30 years old	58	16.2
31-40 years old	64	17.8
41-50 years old	62	17.3
51-60 years old	54	15.0
>60 years old	37	10.3
Sex		
Male	184	51.4
Female	174	48.6
Residence		
City	267	75.9
Village	85	24.1
Region		
Tirana	116	32.2
Durrës	43	11.9
Shkodër	50	13.9
Elbasan	45	12.5
Korçë	49	13.6
Gjirokastrër	57	15.8

*Any discrepancy with the total number is due a to lack of information.

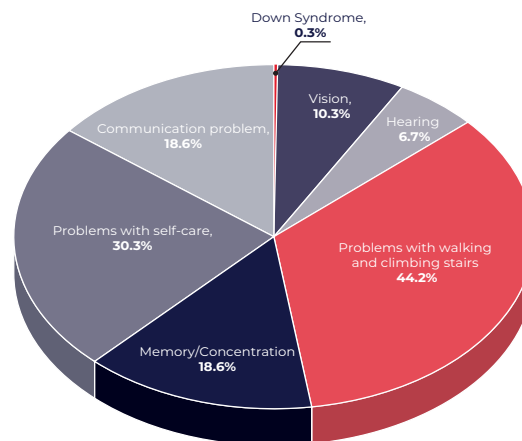


Graph 1. Basic characteristics of the study participants

1.2. Disability data

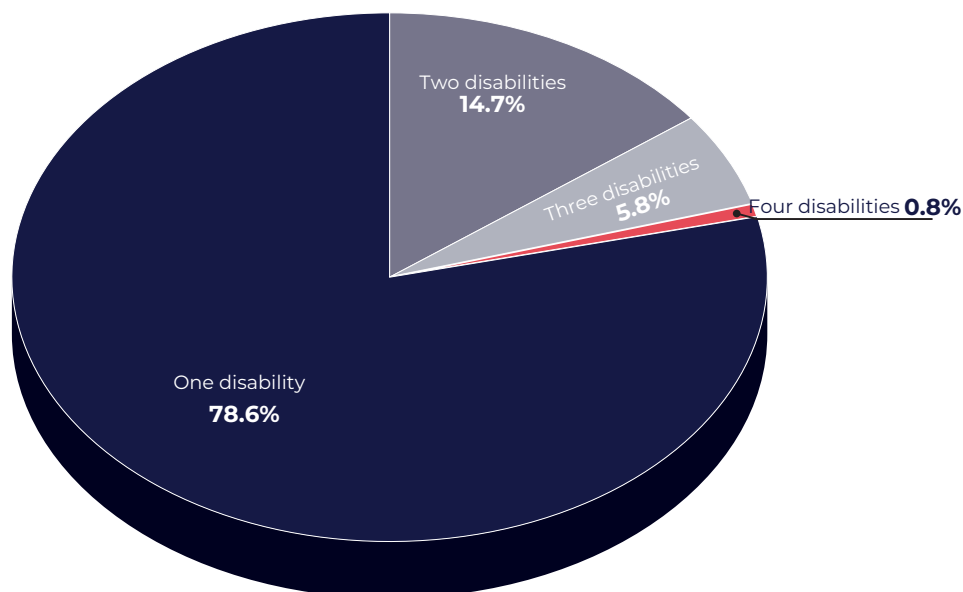
1.2.1. Type of disability and their number

Participants were asked about the type of disability. These data are presented in Graph 2. The most common type of disability was that related to walking and climbing stairs (44.2%), followed by daily self-care (30.3%), memory/concentration problems (18.6%), communication problems (18.6%), vision problems (10.3%), hearing problems (6.7%) and Down Syndrome (0.3%).



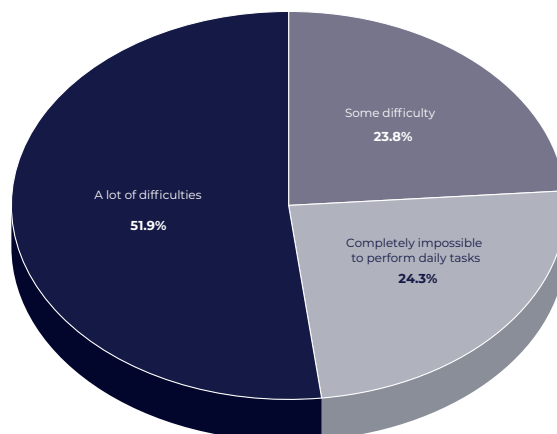
Graph 2. Prevalence of different types of disabilities

Regarding the number of disabilities, over three quarters of people with disabilities (78.6%) had one type of disability, 14.7% had two disabilities, 5.8% had three types of disabilities, and 0.8% had four types of disabilities (Graph 3).



Graph 3. Number of disabilities among participants

About a quarter of PWDs (23.8%) stated that they experience some difficulty in performing daily tasks due to their disability, 51.9% stated that they had a lot of difficulties and 24.3% found it completely impossible to perform daily tasks due to their disability (Graph 4).

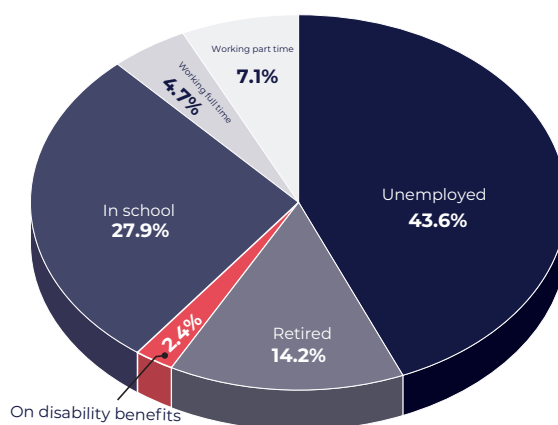


Graph 4. Degree of difficulty to perform daily tasks due to disability

1.3. Economic situation during the COVID-19 pandemic period

1.3.1. Employment status before the COVID-19 pandemic

Participants were asked about the employment status of people with disabilities before the COVID-19 pandemic. These data are presented in Graph 5. More than 4 in 10 people with disabilities turned out to be unemployed before the pandemic, 27.9% were in school, 14.2% were retired, 2.4% were on disability benefits and only 11.8% were employed at the time, either completely or partially (Graph 5).



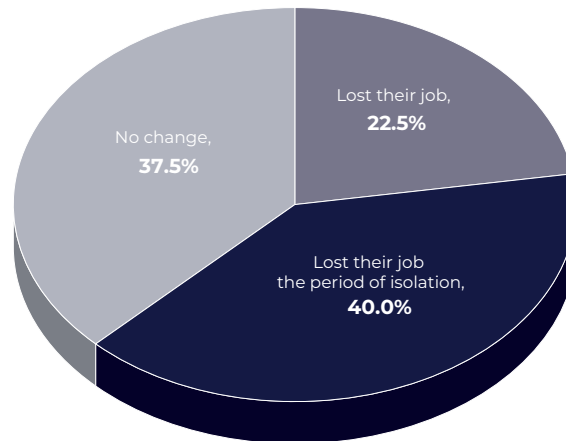
Graph 5. Employment status before the COVID-19 pandemic

Among persons with disabilities over the age of 18 (working age) who provided information on their employment status (n = 258), excluding those who declared that they were in school (n = 17), retirees (n = 48), and the disabled (n = 48), only 21.5% of them (40 individuals or 40/186) were employed full-time or part-time (this data is not presented in Graph 5).

Among people with disabilities before the COVID-19 pandemic, 50% of them were uninsured, i.e. working informally, and the remaining 50% were insured (these data are not shown in the Graph).

Meanwhile, about two-thirds (62.5%) of people with disabilities who were employed before the pre-epidemic reported losing their job (22.5%) or being suspended from work (40%)

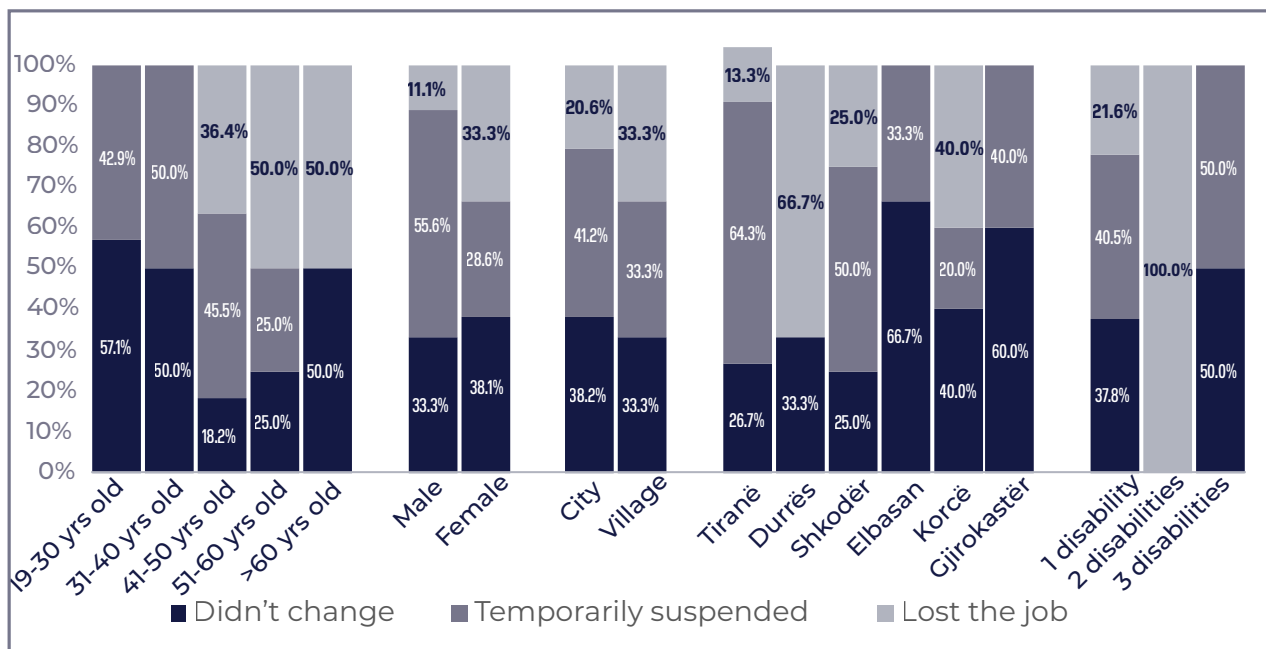
during the COVID-19 pandemic, meanwhile that for 37.5% of them, the employment relationship did not change (Chart 6).



Graph 6. Change in employment status during the COVID-19 pandemic among people with disabilities

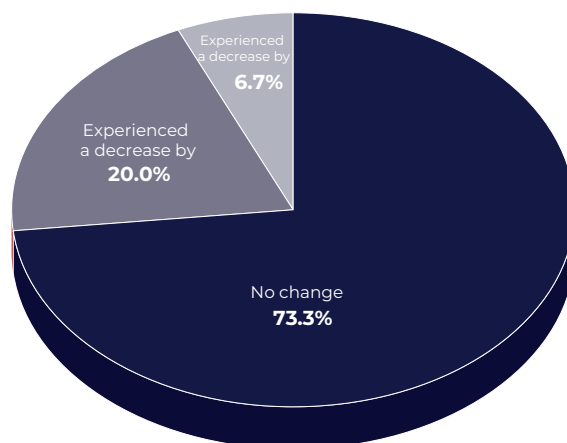
Graph 7 presents the change of employment status for people with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to their characteristics.

It can be seen that the percentages of PWDs who lost their jobs during the pandemic are higher among women than men (33.3% vs. 11.1%, respectively), increase with age (36.4% of those 41-50 years old, and 50% of those 51-60 years old and > 60 years old, each), among PWDs living in rural rather than urban areas (33.3% vs. 20.6%, respectively), between PWDs living in Durrës (66.7%) and Korça (40%), and among PWDs with two disabilities 100% of whom lost their jobs during the pandemic compared to 21.6% of PWDs with one disability (Chart 7).



Graph 7. Change of employment status during the COVID-19 pandemic among PWDs, according to independent factors

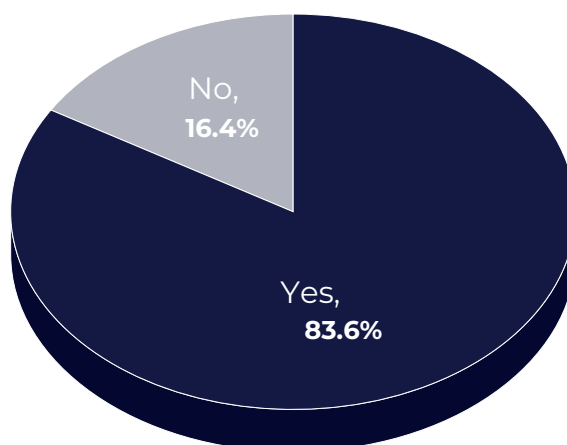
Among PWDs who continued to be employed during the COVID-19 pandemic (n = 15), in 73.3% of cases their salary did not change, in 20% of cases the salary decreased by 30%, and in 6.7% of cases the salary decreased by 50% (Chart 8).



Graph 8. Wage change among PWDs who kept their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic (n = 15)

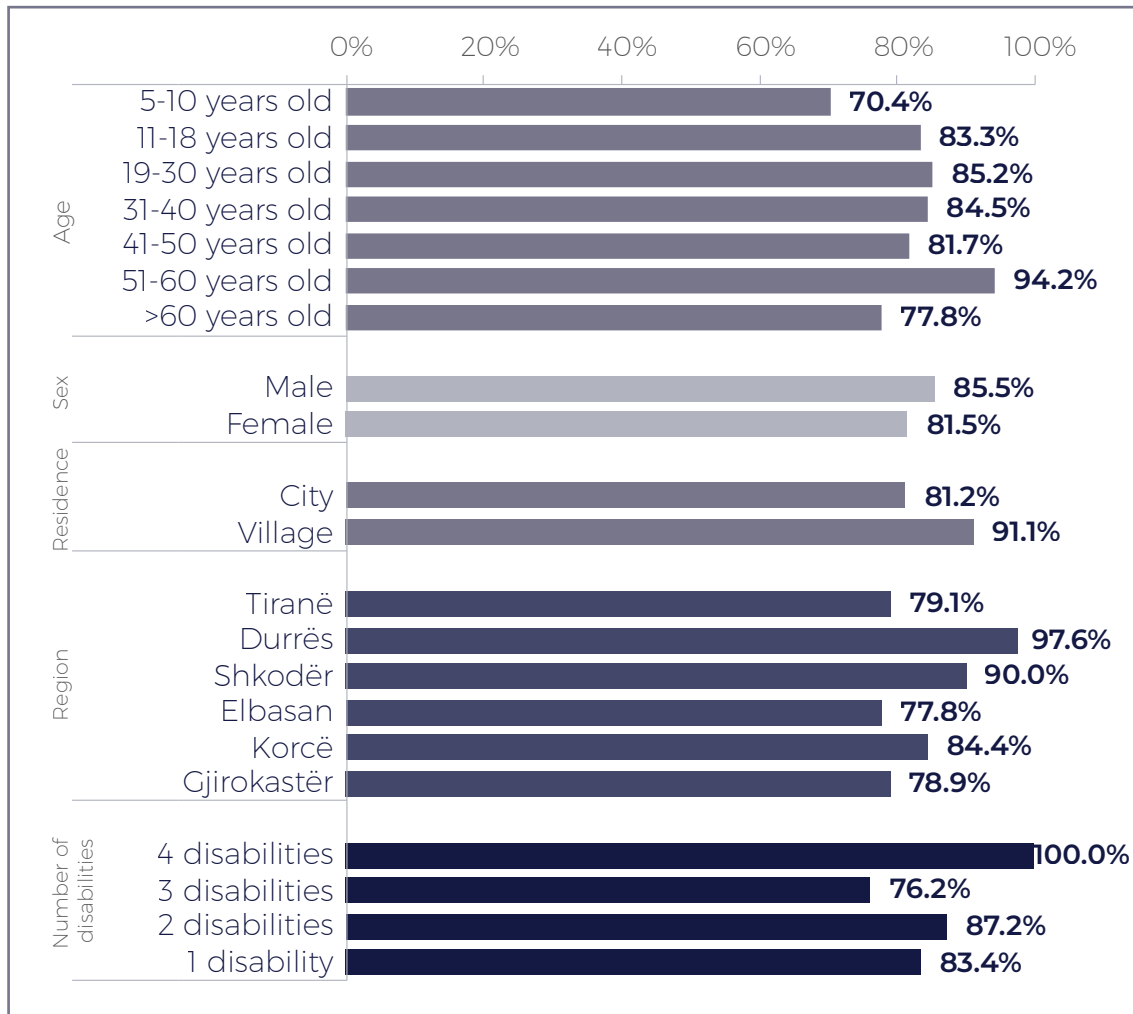
1.3.2. Financial problems as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic

Participants were asked if they had experienced financial problems as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic. More than 8 in 10 people (83.6%) with disabilities who provided information (n = 336) experienced financial problems directly from the COVID-19 pandemic (Chart 9).



Graph 9. Financial problems as a direct consequence of the pandemic

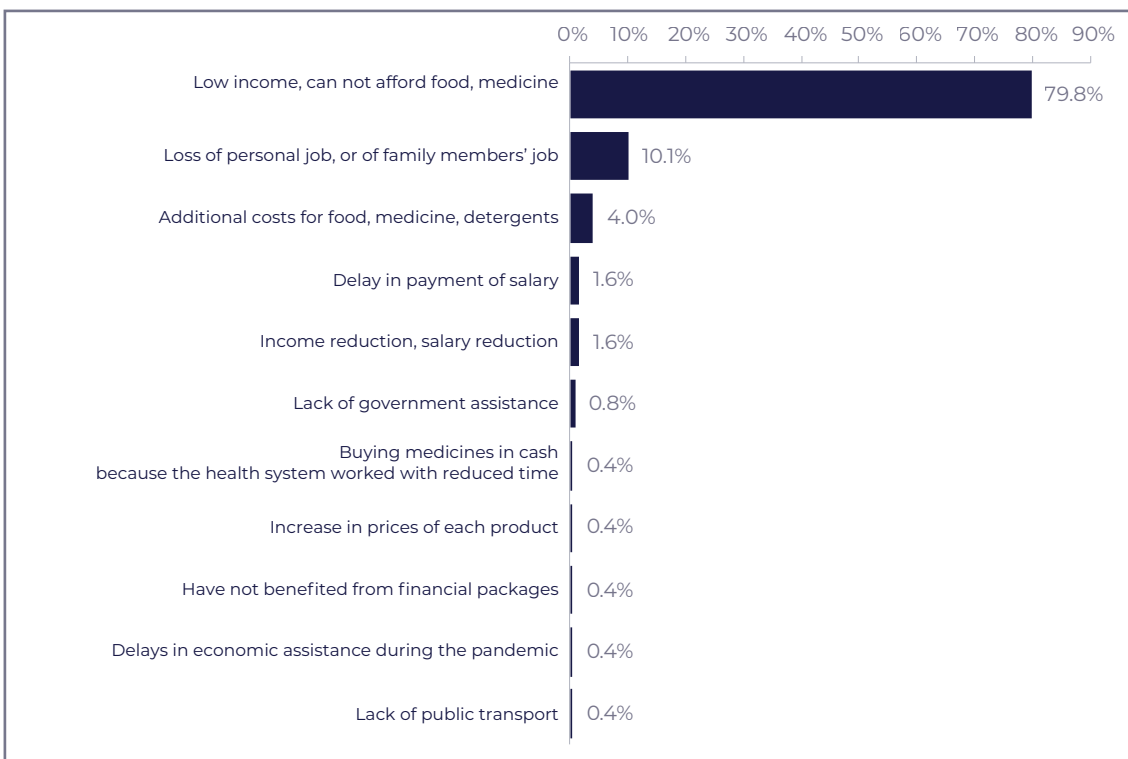
Graph 10 presents the percentages of people with disabilities who have experienced financial problems as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic, according to independent factors in the study. The highest percentages are among people with disabilities aged 51-60 (94.2%), among men (85.5%), among those living in rural areas (91.1%) and in Durrës (97.6%) and Shkodra (90%) as well as among persons with 4 different types of disabilities 100% of whom said that they experienced financial problems as a direct result of the pandemic (Chart 10).



Graph 10. Percentage of PWDs who have experienced financial problems from the COVID-19 pandemic, according to independent factors

Those who stated that they had experienced financial problems as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic were invited to specify the type of financial problems experienced. Their answers are presented in Graph 11.

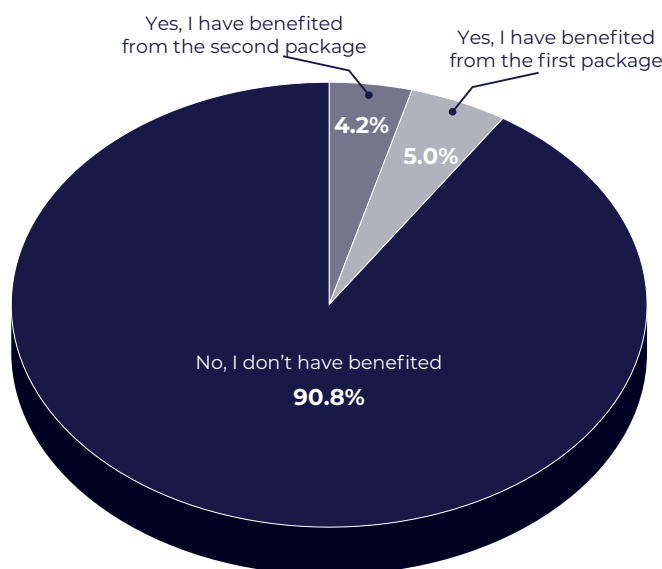
The vast majority of people with disabilities or their caregivers who had financial problems due to the pandemic reported that the main direct financial problem of the COVID-19 pandemic was “low income and (an) inability to afford living, food and medicine,” as cited by 79.8% of participants, followed by 10.1% who stated that they or their family members had lost their job, 4% complained about additional expenses for food, medicine and detergents, 1.6% reported delays in the payment of salary and equally reported income cuts and pay cuts, among other problems.



Graph 11. Types of financial problems as a direct consequence of the pandemic

1.3.3. Financial support during the COVID-19 pandemic

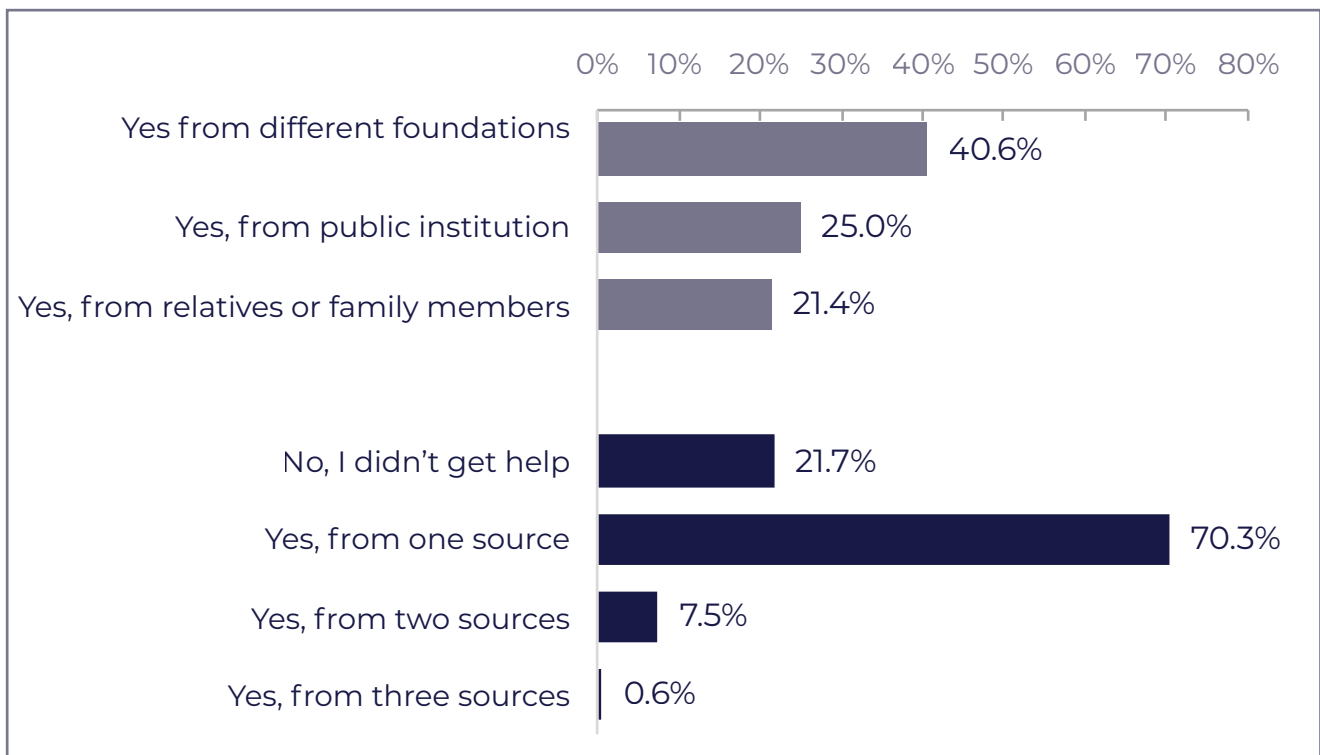
The vast majority of individuals with disabilities (90.8%) stated that they had not benefited from the Government financial package, 5% had benefited from the first package and 4.2% from the second package (Chart 12). This graph includes all people with disabilities, regardless of employment status (before and during the pandemic), if they have benefited from government assistance under coping with COVID-19 (does not refer to the monthly payments that PWDs have received under deadlines and law).



Graph 12. Percentage of PWDs who have benefited from Government financial packages

In addition to assistance from Government financial packages, participants were asked if they received food, cash or service assistance during the COVID-19 pandemic and, if so, what were the sources of this support. These data are presented in Graph 13. It can be seen that approximately four in ten people with disabilities (40.6%) have received support from various organizations or foundations during the COVID-19 pandemic, one in four people with disabilities (25%) have received support in services or food from public institutions such as the Municipality or other care institutions and 21.4% have been supported by their relatives or family members.

Meanwhile, more than one in five people with disabilities (21.7%) have not received any assistance during the pandemic period (they have not benefited either from Government financial packages or from other sources such as relatives, other public institutions or organizations / foundations), 70.3% received support from one source, 7.5% from two sources and 0.6% from three sources (Chart 13). This chart refers to additional assistance that the government or other bodies have provided in the management of COVID-19, in addition to the monthly payment they have received under the law.



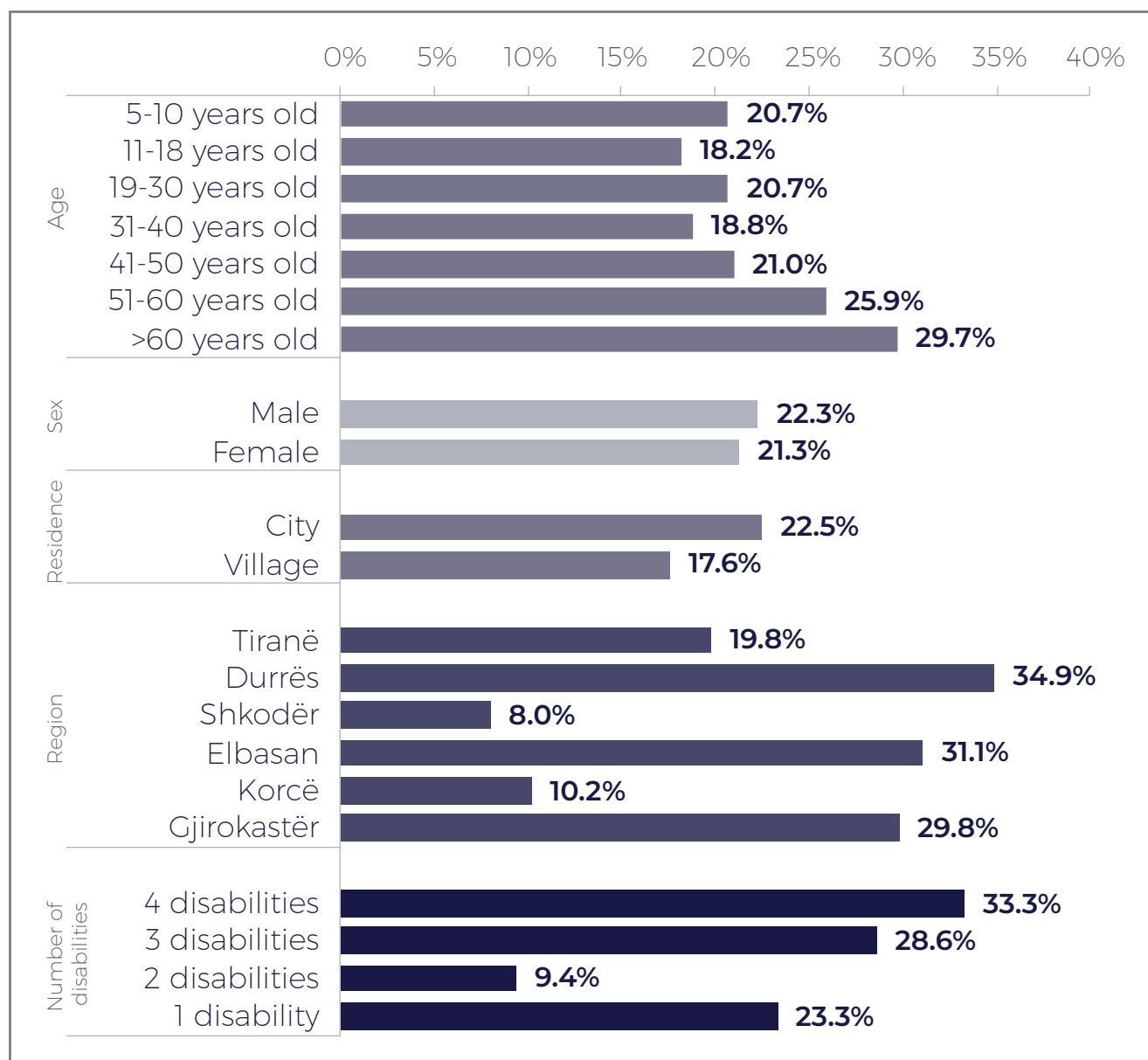
Graph 13. Percentage of PWDs who received assistance from various sources during the COVID-19 pandemic

Chart 14 shows the percentages of participants with disabilities who did not receive support from any source during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to independent factors included in the survey.

It is noticed that with increasing age the percentage of people with disabilities who have not received any support from any source during the pandemic increases: from 21% among PWDs aged 41-50 years old, to 25.9% among those aged 51-60 years old and 29.7% to PWDs over 60 years old.

In addition, the percentages of PWDs who did not receive any support during the pandemic are higher among men, among those living in urban areas, among PWDs living in Durrës (34.9%), Elbasan (31.1%) and Gjirokastra (29.8%). Likewise, there is a tendency for

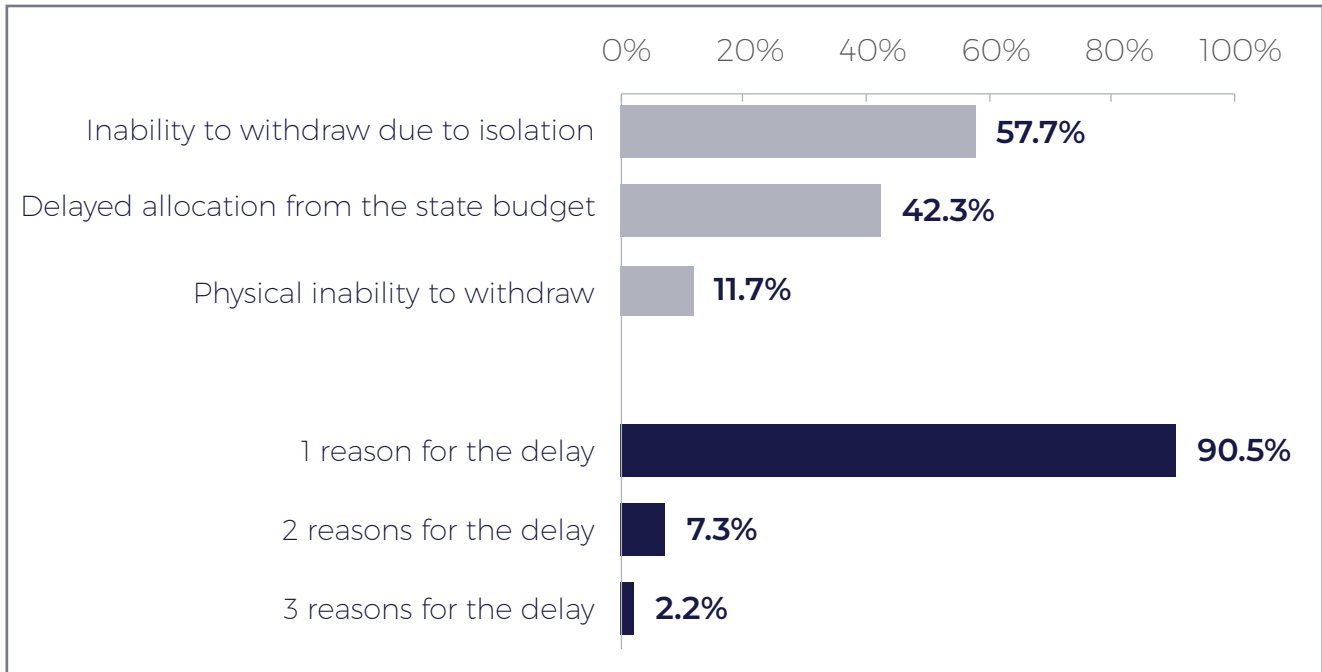
the percentage of PWDs who have not received any support to increase with the increase in the number of disabilities going to 28.6% for PWDs with three disabilities and 33.3% for those with four different disabilities (Chart 14).



Graph 14. Percentage of PWDs who did NOT receive assistance from various sources during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to independent factors

Regarding the delays in receiving the monthly disability payment, 39.3% of people with disabilities have experienced such delays during the pandemic period.

Among those who experienced these delays, 42.3% stated that this was due to the delayed allocation of funds from the state budget, 57.7% stated that there were difficulties in withdrawing payments due to isolation and 11.7% were physically impossible to withdraw funds on time. In total, 90.5% of PWDs reported one reason for delays in receiving disability payment, 7.3% reported two reasons for delays and 2.2% reported three reasons (Chart 15).

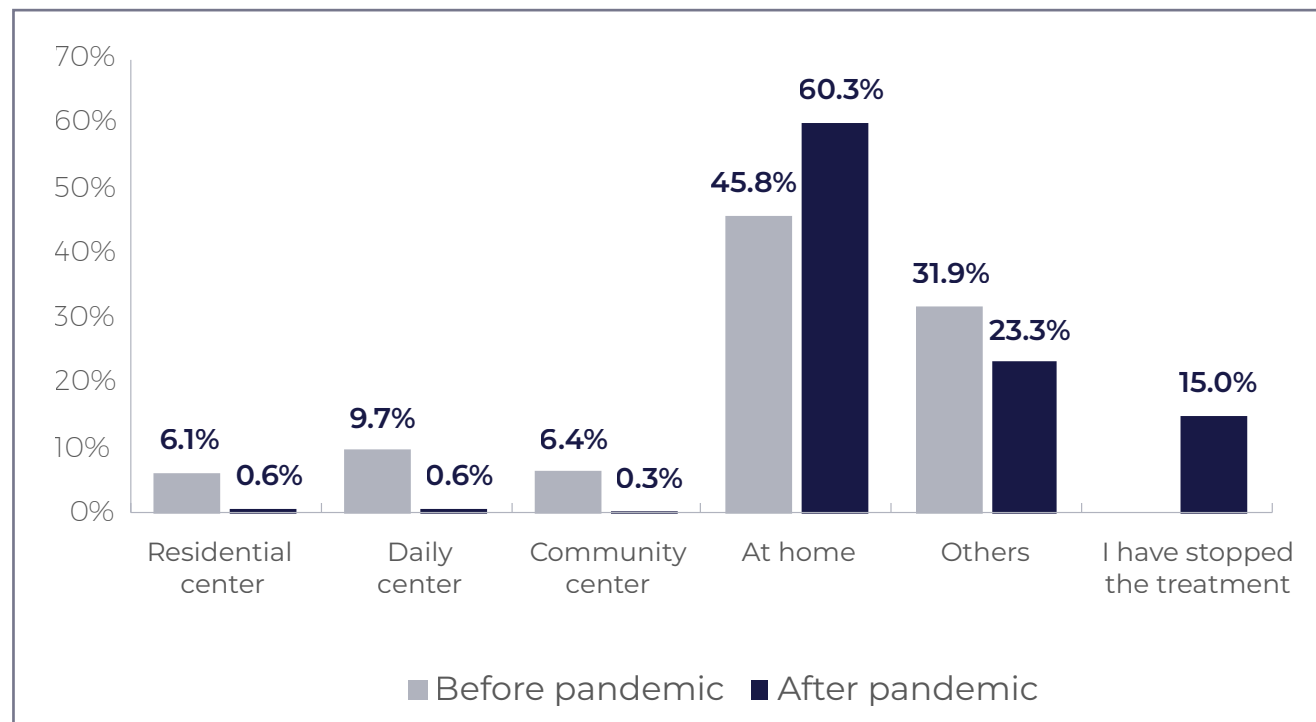


Graph 15. Percentage of PWDs who have experienced delays in receiving disability payment according to the reasons for the delay and their number

1.4. Health status of PWDs during the COVID-19 pandemic period

1.4.1. Place of disability treatment before and after the COVID-19 pandemic

Participants were asked about where they treated their disability before and after the COVID-19 pandemic. These data are presented in Graph 16.

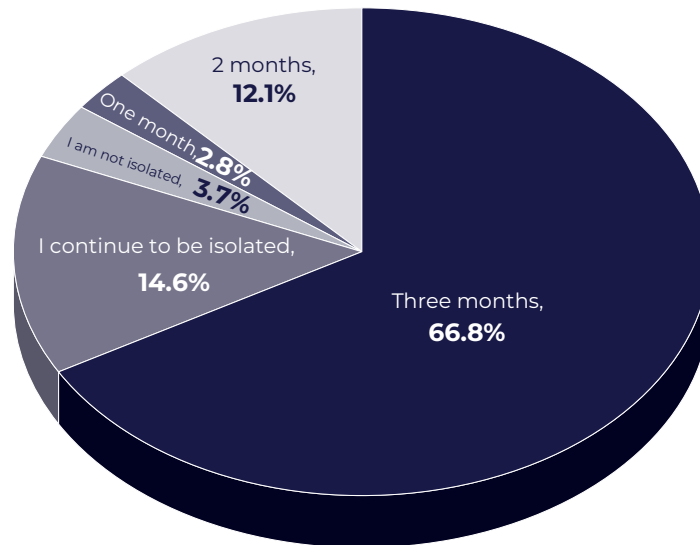


Graph 16. Place of disability treatment, before and after the COVID-19 pandemic

It can be noticed that there are big differences before and during the pandemic regarding this indicator. Thus, before the pandemic 6.1% of PWDs were treated in a residential center, the same percentage decreases to 0.6% after the pandemic; before the pandemic, 9.7% of PWDs were treated in a day center vs. 0.6% during the pandemic; before the pandemic 6.4% of PWDs were treated in a community center vs. 0.3% during the pandemic. During the pandemic, the percentage of PWDs who treated their disability at home increased significantly (60.3% vs. 45.8% before the pandemic). Likewise, 31.9% of PWDs treated their disability in places other than those mentioned (such as hospitals, clinics, churches, or other places), compared to 23.3% who did so after the pandemic. These changes were statistically significant (p-value according to McNemar test for two related samples <0.001). Also noteworthy is the fact that 15% of people with disabilities discontinued their disability treatment after the pandemic (Chart 16).

1.4.2. Isolation time due to COVID-19 pandemic

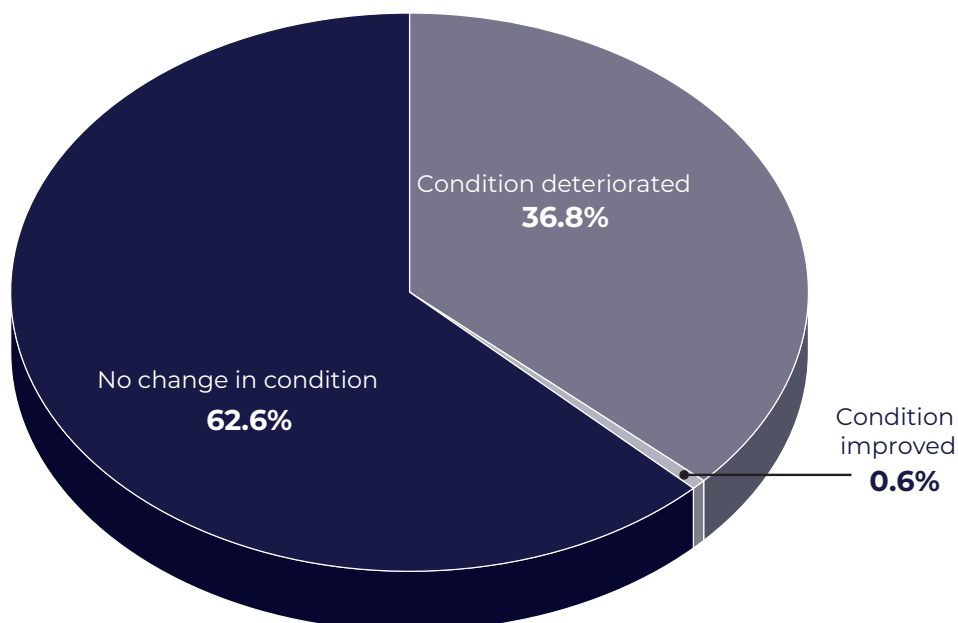
Participants were asked about how long they remained isolated as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. About 70% of people with disabilities remained isolated for three months, about 3% were isolated for one month, 12% were isolated for two months, about 15% stated that they continue to be isolated, and about 4% reported that were not isolated (Graph 17).



Graph 17. Time of isolated stay of PWDs as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic

1.4.3. Health status of PWDs during the period of isolation

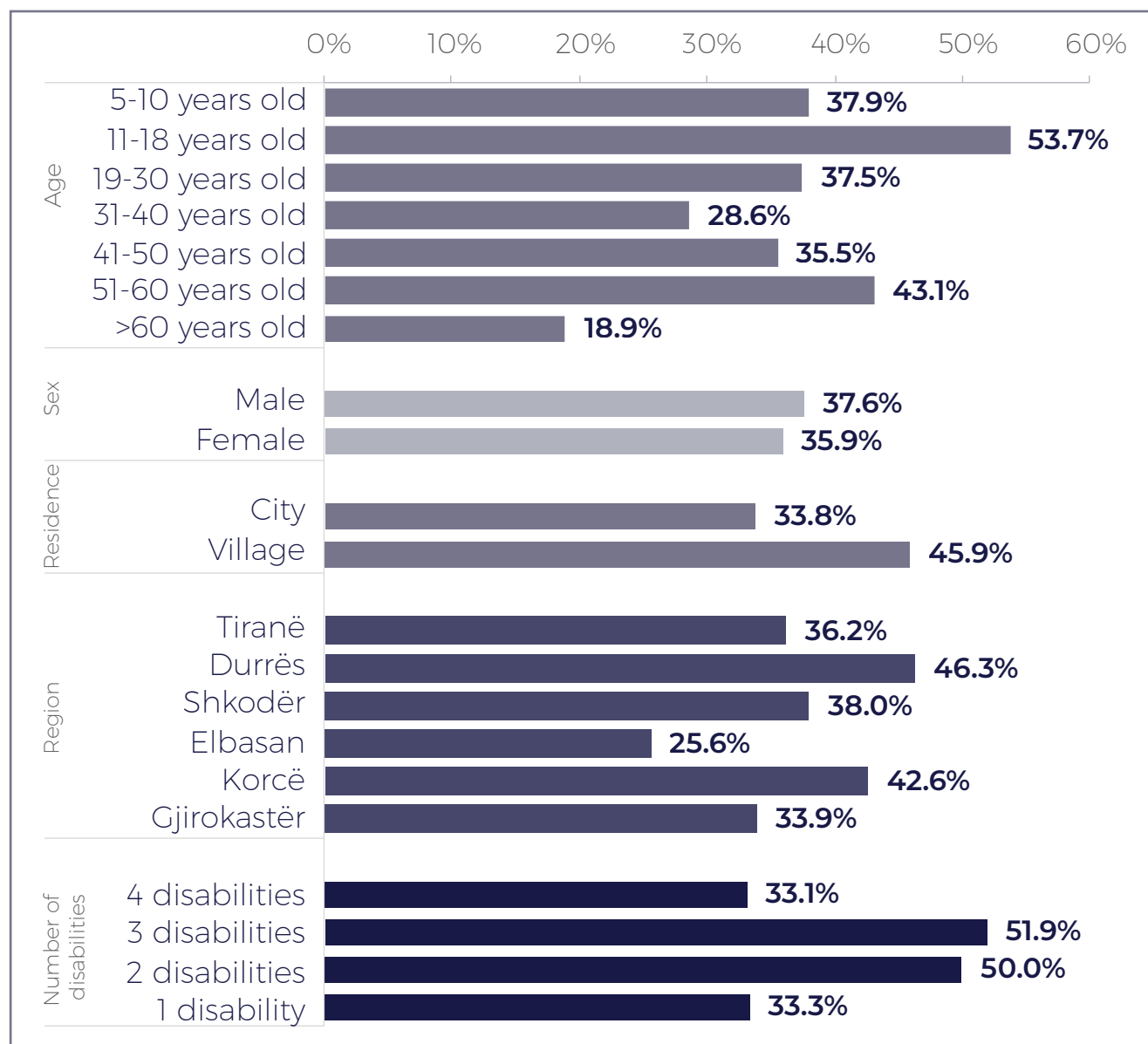
During the period of isolation or restriction of movement as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the health condition deteriorated for about 37% of people with disabilities, while it did not change for 63% of them and improved in 0.6% of cases (Chart 18).



Graph 18. Health status of PWDs during the period of isolation

Graph 19 presents the percentages of individuals with disabilities whose health status deteriorated during the period of isolation, according to independent factors in the study.

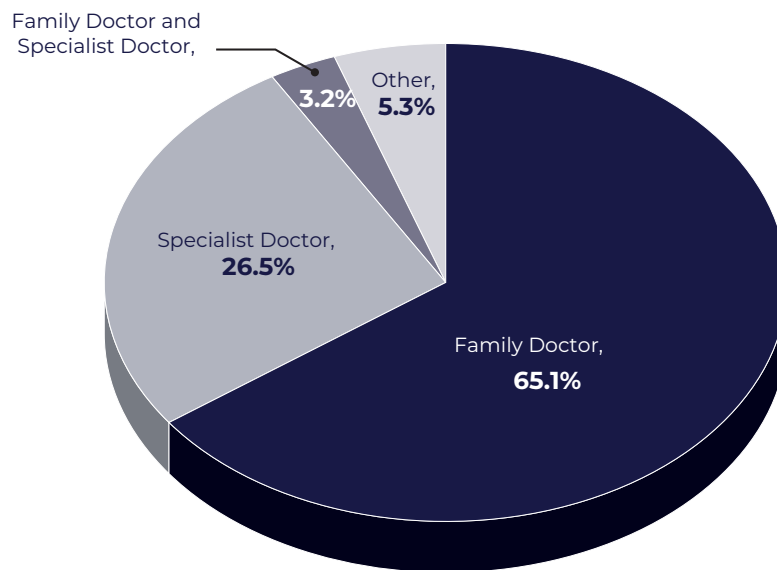
There is generally no clear linear trend of the percentage of PWDs whose health deteriorated during isolation according to independent factors. This percentage was higher among PWDs aged 11-18 (53.7%) and those aged 51-60 (53.1%), PWDs living in rural areas (45.9%) or Durrës (46.3%) and Korca (42.6%), and people with two (51.9%) and three different types of disabilities (50%).



Graph 19. Health status of PWDs during the period of isolation, according to independent factors

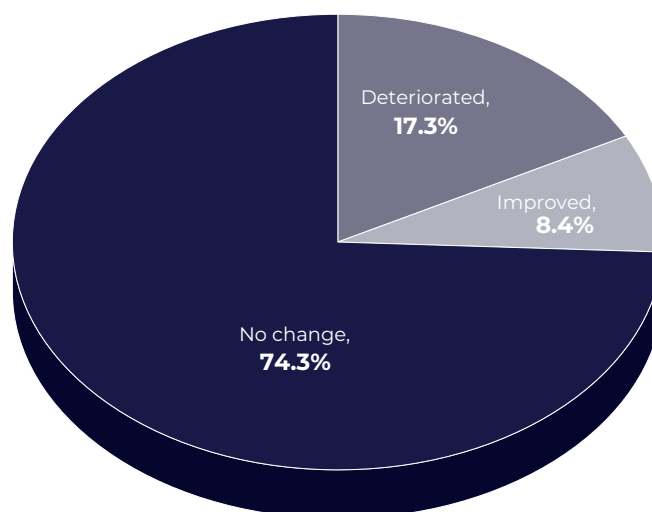
1.4.4. Health care during the COVID-19 pandemic

More than half of the people with disabilities (56.4%) for whom there is information have sought medical help during the pandemic period. Among these, 65.1% have sought help from a family doctor, 26.5% from a specialist, 3.2% have sought help from both a family doctor and a specialist, and 5.3% have sought help from other sources such as family, friends, psychiatrist, various associations, hospital, among others (Graph 20).

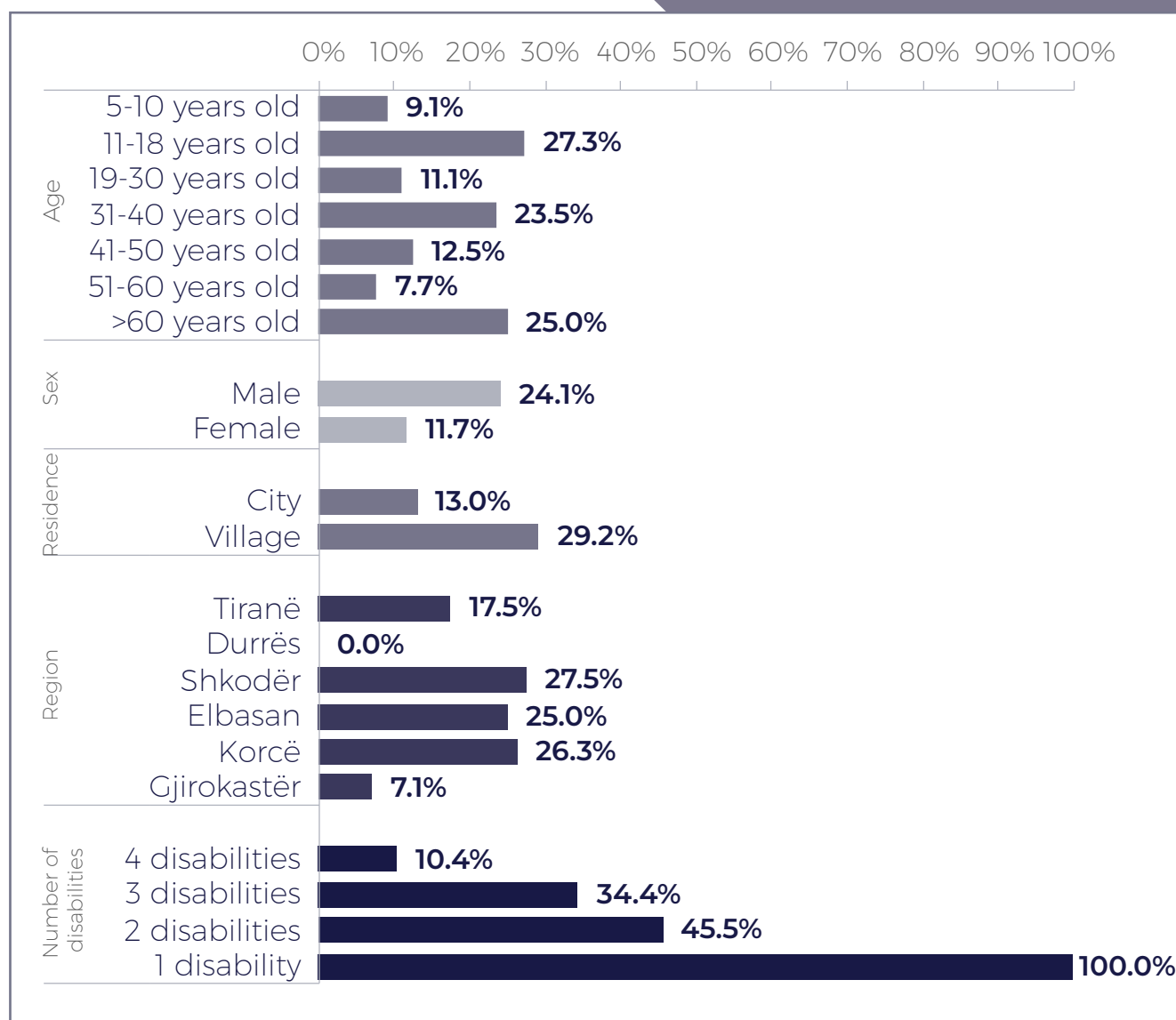


Graph 20. Source where PWDs sought health care during the pandemic

Participants who stated that they used the health system during the pandemic (all three levels) were invited to evaluate the service received in these institutions during the pandemic. Their answers are presented in Graph 21. According to the participants, the health service during the pandemic deteriorated in 17.3% of cases, improved in 8.4% of cases, and did not change in the vast majority (74.3%) of cases.



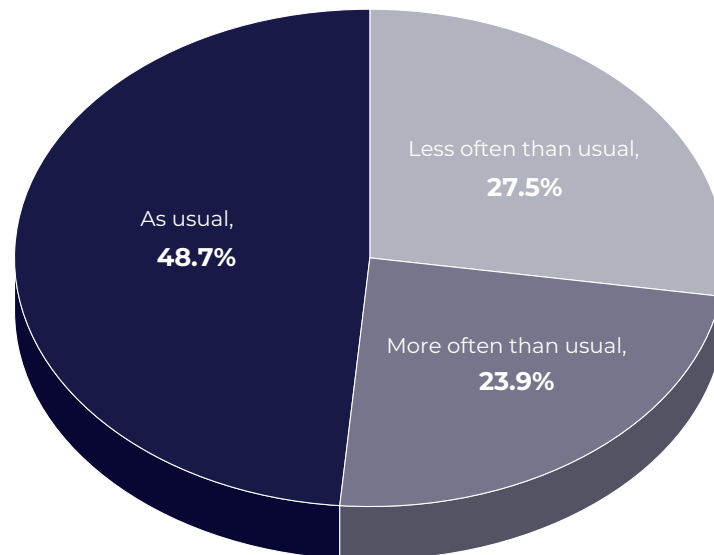
Graph 21. Evaluation of health service during the pandemic



Graph 22. Percentage of PWDs who think that health care has deteriorated during the pandemic, according to independent factors

With the exception of age, all other differences are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). Thus, the percentage of PWDs who think that health service during the pandemic has deteriorated is significantly higher among men, those living in rural areas, Shkodra, Korca and Elbasan and increases with the increase in the number of disabilities. The relationship with the number of disabilities is statistically significant, is positive, and has a linear trend; that is, with the increase in the number of disabilities, the percentage of PWDs who think that health care during the pandemic has deteriorated significantly increases: 10.4% among PWDs with one type of disability, 34.4% among PWDs with two types of disabilities, 45.5% among PWDs with three types of disabilities and 100% among PWDs with four types of disabilities (Chart 22).

Regarding the frequency of contacting a family doctor during the pandemic, 23.9% of PWDs who provided information stated that they contacted the doctor more often than usual, 48.7% contacted the doctor as usual and 27.5% contacted the doctor less often than usual (Chart 23).

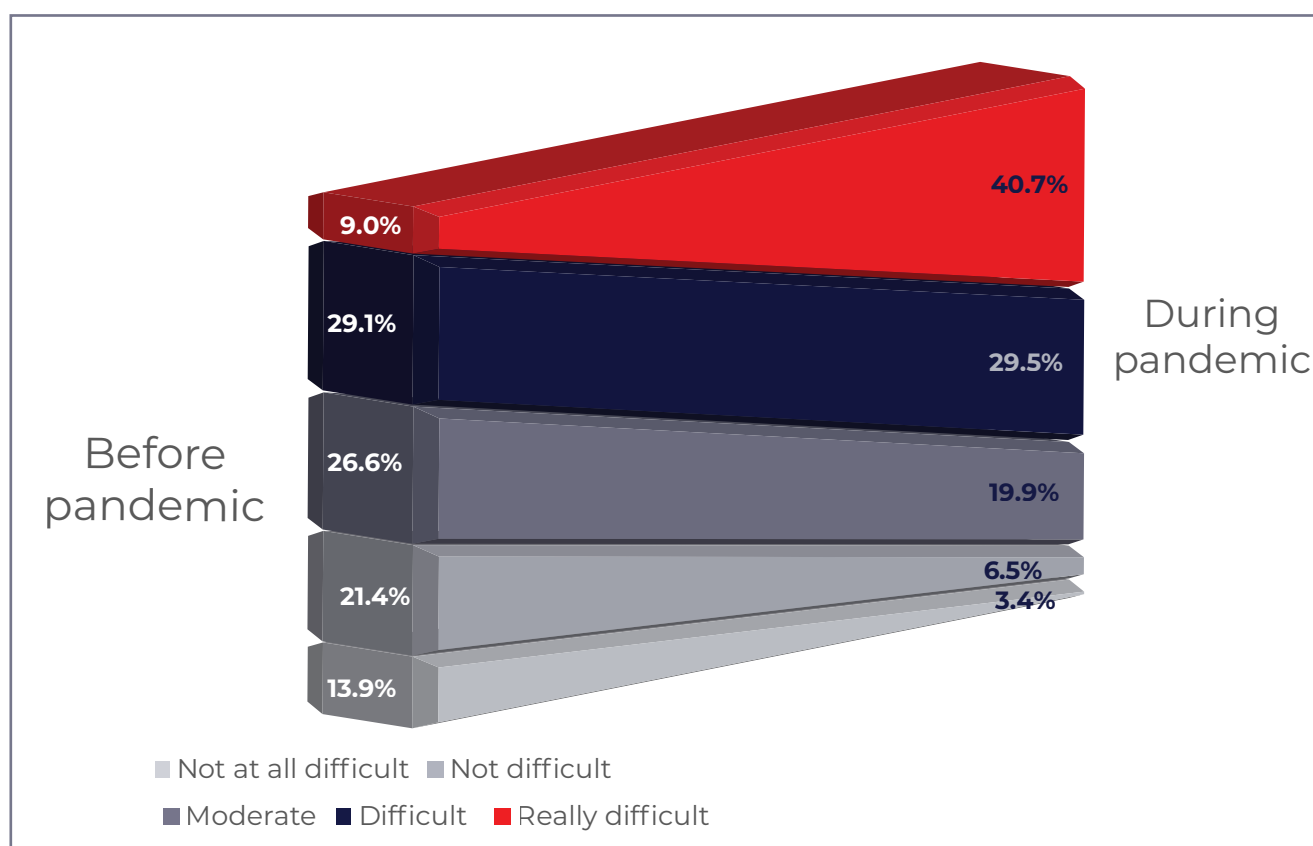


Graph 23. Frequency of contact with family doctor during the COVID-19 pandemic

The percentage of PWDs who made contact less often than usual with the family doctor was significantly higher between PWDs living in Shkodra (60%) and Elbasan (31%), while the other differences were not statistically significant (these data not shown in Graphics).

1.4.5. Access to medicines before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

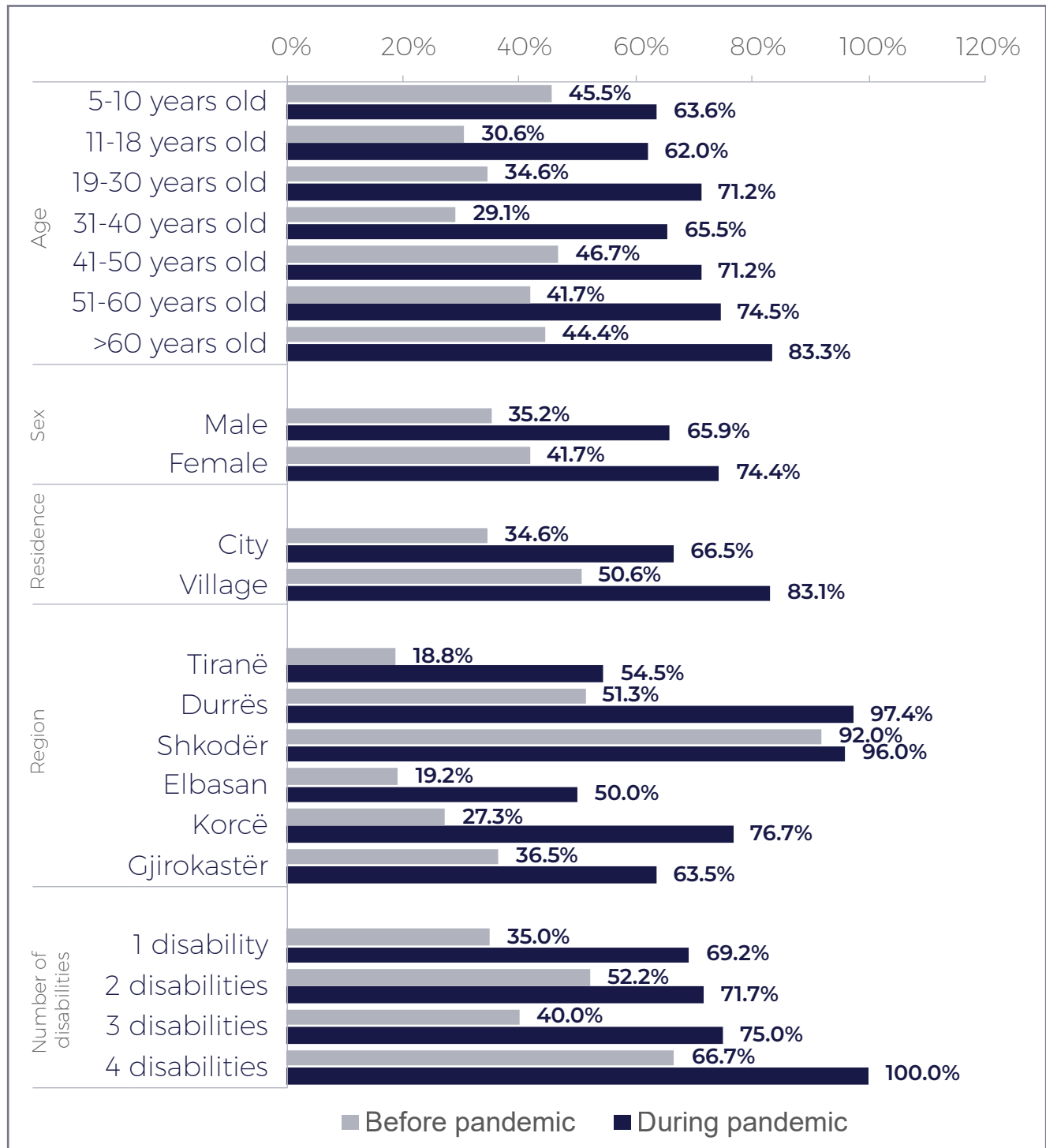
Participants were asked about the degree of difficulty they experienced accessing medication in the period before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their answers are presented in Graph 24. It can be noticed that during the pandemic the percentage of PWDs who state that they have had great difficulty in accessing medicines during the pandemic has significantly increased compared to the period before the pandemic (40.7% vs. 9%, respectively). This is mainly due to the decrease in the percentage of PWDs who did not have any difficulty at all, and had access to non-difficult or moderately difficult drugs during the pandemic compared to the period before the pandemic. These differences are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$ according to the McNemar test for two related samples).



Graph 24. Degree of difficulty in accessing medication before and during the pandemic

Graph 25 presents the percentage of PWDs who had difficulty or great difficulty in accessing medication before and during the pandemic, according to independent factors in the study.

It can be seen that the percentage of PWDs who had difficulty or great difficulty accessing medication during the COVID-19 pandemic increased for each study group, compared to the corresponding pre-pandemic figures.



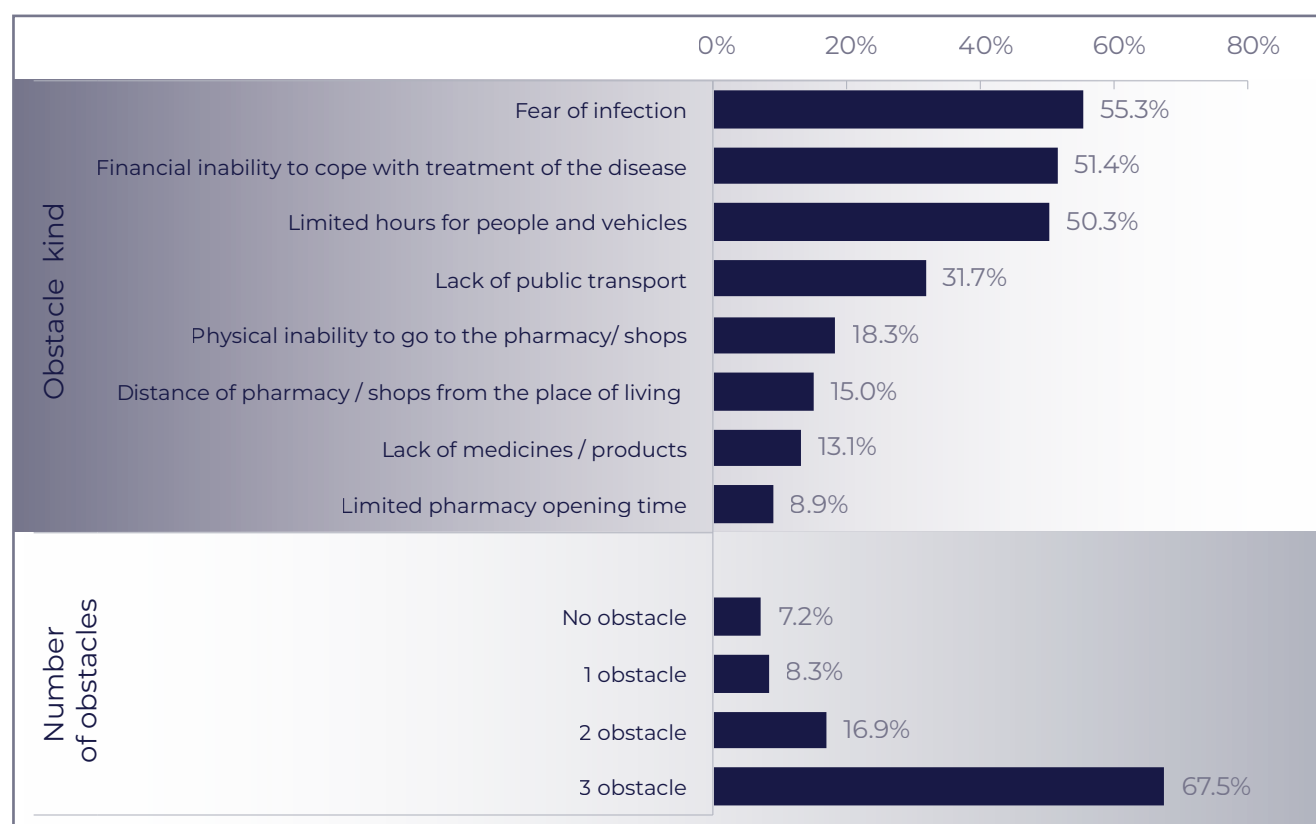
Graph 25. Percentage of PWDs who had difficulty or very difficult access to medication before and during the pandemic, according to independent factors

The degree of difficulty in accessing medication was found to be positively and significantly correlated with the presence of financial problems as a direct result of the pandemic, and even this link is further strengthened during the pandemic: the Spearman correlation coefficient between these two indicators is 0.207 before the pandemic and 0.273 after the pandemic ($p < 0.001$). Strengthening the connection means increasing the degree of difficulty in accessing medication during the pandemic.

1.4.6. The main barriers to securing medical supplies during the pandemic

The main obstacle to providing the medical materials needed by participants with disabilities in the study during the pandemic resulted from “fear of infection”, as cited by 55.3% of participants, followed by “financial inability to cope with treatment of the disease and living” mentioned by 51.4% of them, “restriction of movement of people and vehicles” in 50.3% of cases and “lack of public transport” mentioned in 31.7% of cases. Other barriers included physical inability to go to the pharmacy (18.3%), distance of the pharmacy from the apartment (15%), lack of various medicines or products (13.1%) and limited time pharmacies were open (8.9%) [Graph 26].

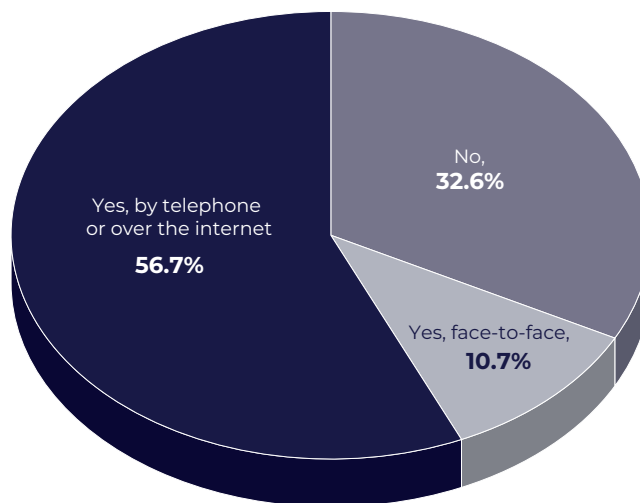
Over two-thirds (67.5%) of PWDs reported three major barriers to providing the medical supplies they needed during the pandemic, 16.9% reported two barriers, 8.3% one barrier, and 7.2% reported no barriers to this (Chart 26).



Graph 26. Main barriers to securing medical supplies during pandemic

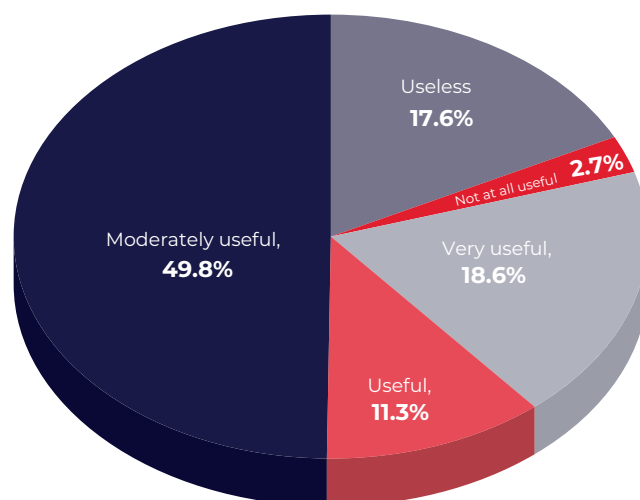
1.4.7. Consultation with health professionals during the pandemic

Participants with disabilities were asked if they received specific advice from health care professionals who normally care about their condition. More than half (55.5%) of PWDs responding reported that they had not received such advice from healthcare professionals during the pandemic while the remaining 45.5% reported that they had been counseled. Among PWDs who had received medical advice from healthcare professionals during the pandemic, 85.1% of them reported that the advice given was valid, in their opinion. On the other hand, about 32.6% of PWDs who provided information reported that they did not have any consultation regarding their health condition during the pandemic, 10.7% reported that they had such face-to-face consultations with health care staff and 56.7% reported having conducted such consultations by telephone or over the internet (Chart 27).



Graph 27. Development of medical consultations during the COVID-19 pandemic

On the other hand, participants with disabilities who had consulted with the medical staff were invited to evaluate the usefulness of these consultations (Chart 28).

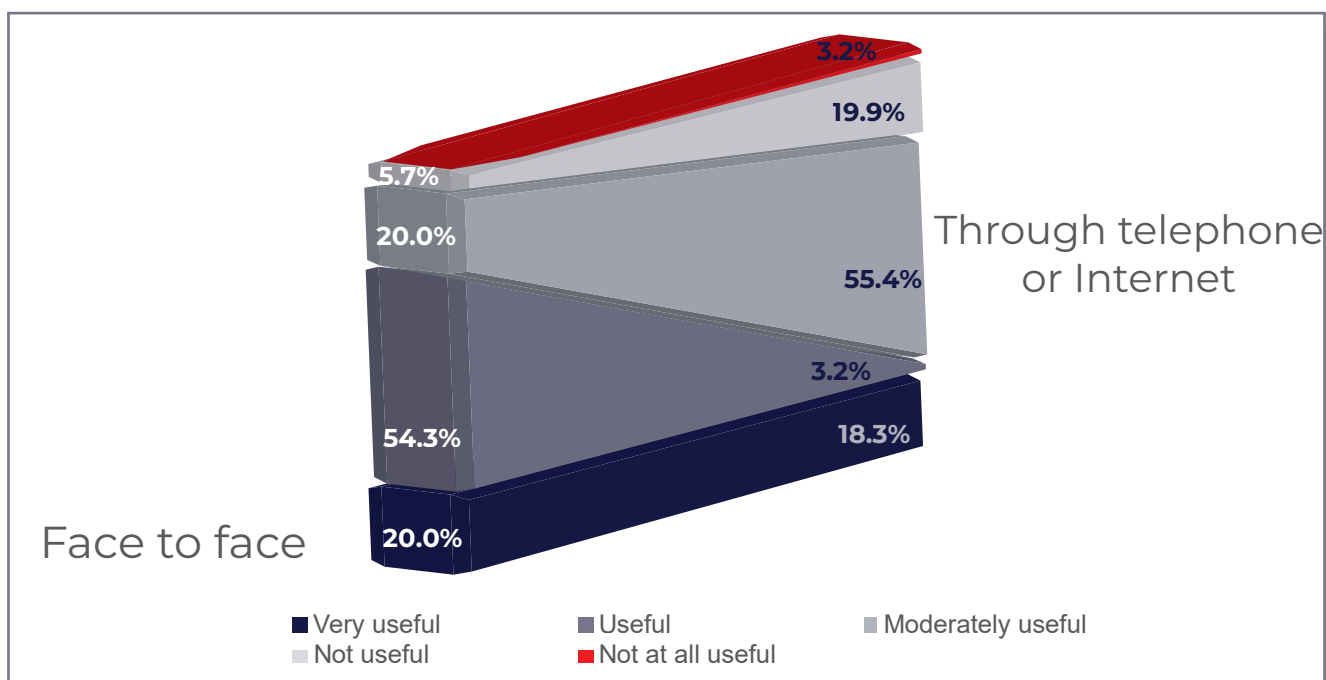


Graph 28. The degree of usefulness of medical consultations during the COVID-19 pandemic (only among PWDs who have performed such consultations)

It can be noticed that half (49.8%) of PWDs who have attended medical consultations for their condition during the COVID-19 pandemic assess these consultations as moderately useful, 20.3% evaluate them as useless or not at all useful and 29.9% evaluate them as useful or very useful (Graph 28).

Graph 29 presents the evaluation regarding the usefulness of medical consultations during the COVID-19 pandemic by type of consultation: face-to-face or by telephone/online.

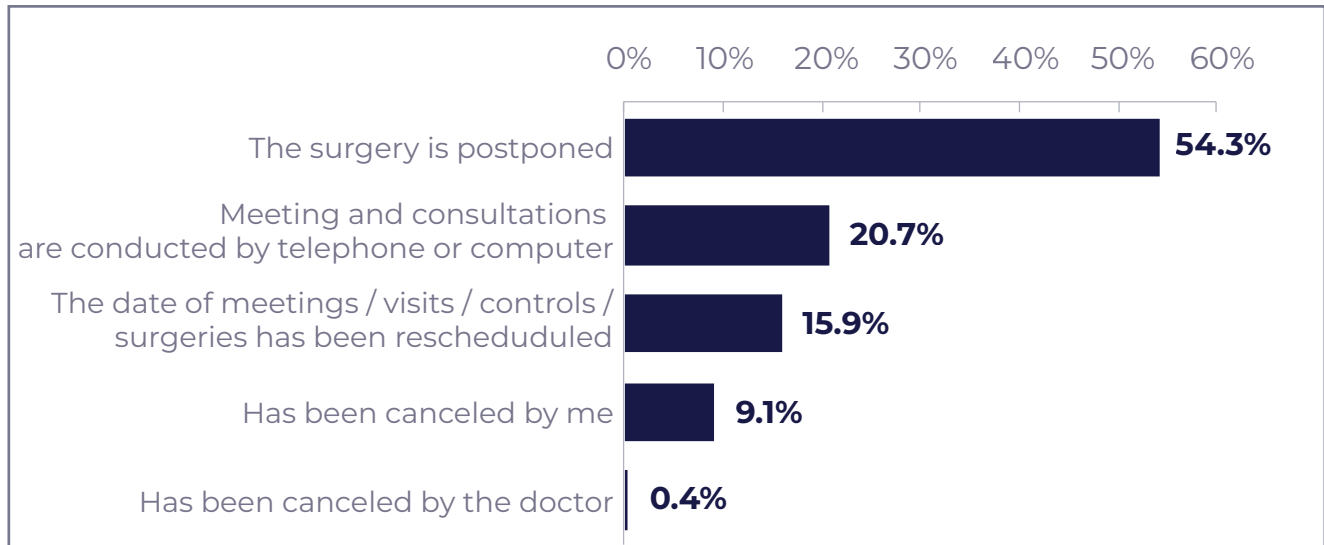
It can be noticed that a much higher percentage of PWDs evaluate face-to-face consultation as useful (54.3%) compared to 3.2% of those who think the same about telephone/internet consultations. On the other hand, only 20% of PWDs consider face-to-face consultations to be moderately useful compared to 55.4% of them who think the same about telephone/online consultations. Finally, only 5.7% of PWDs think that face-to-face consultations are not useful or not at all useful, compared to 23.1% who have the same opinion about telephone/internet consultations (Chart 29). These differences are statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).



Grafiku 29. Shkalla e dobisë së konsultave mjekësore gjatë pandemisë, sipas llojit të konsultës

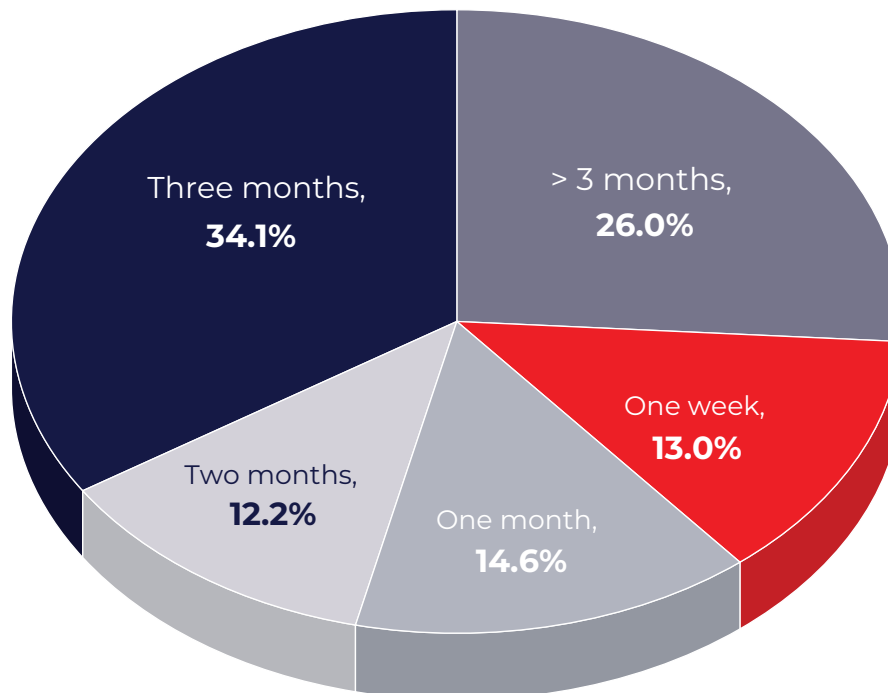
Meanwhile, more than a third (64.4%) of PWDs stated that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed their schedule of treatments or medical visits. Graph 30 details the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the schedule of treatments or medical visits for PWDs (for whom the schedule has changed), presenting the respective percentages.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the postponement of a planned intervention in 54.3% of cases. In about 21% of cases, consultations were realized over the telephone or online, in 15.9% of cases there was a re-planning of the visit or consultation, in 9.1% of cases the people with disabilities themselves or their guardians canceled the planned visit or consultation, and in 0.4% of cases the doctor cancelled (Chart 30).



Graph 30. Changing the schedule of treatments or medical visits for people with disabilities from the pandemic

Among PWDs for whom the planned intervention was postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, in over half of them (60.1%) the intervention was postponed for three months or more, in 12.2% of cases the intervention was postponed for two months, in 14.6% of cases it was postponed for a month and in 13% of cases it was postponed for one week (Chart 31).

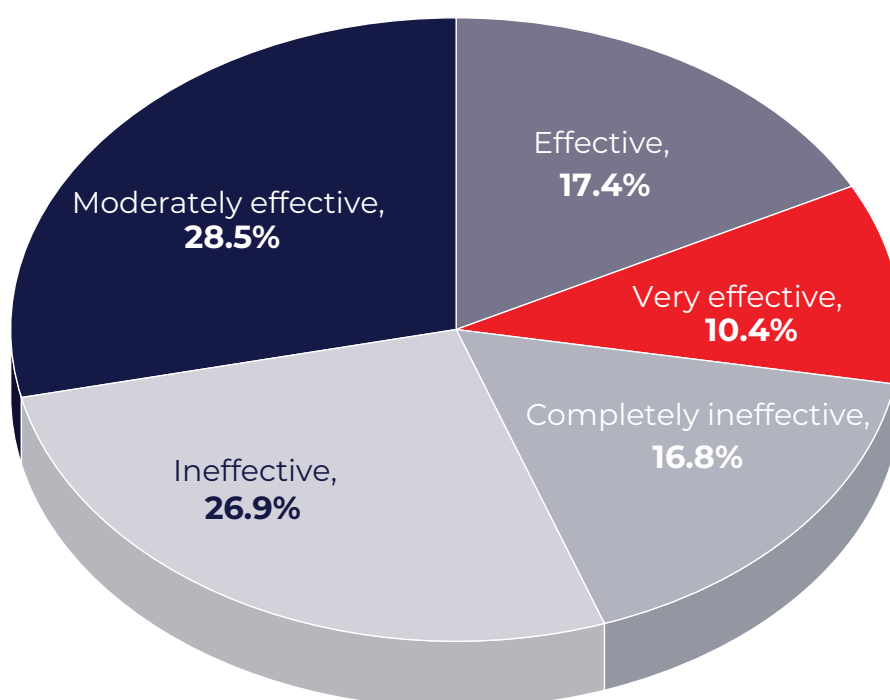


Graph 31. How long the planned intervention was postponed as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (only among PWDs for whom the intervention was postponed)

Postponements of planned interventions for PWDs of 3 months or more occurred significantly more often in the regions of Tirana (69.6%), Durrës (60%) and Korca (60%), compared to the respective percentages in Shkodra (0%), Elbasan (57.2%) and Gjirokastra (48.4%), while the differences according to other independent factors were not statistically significant.

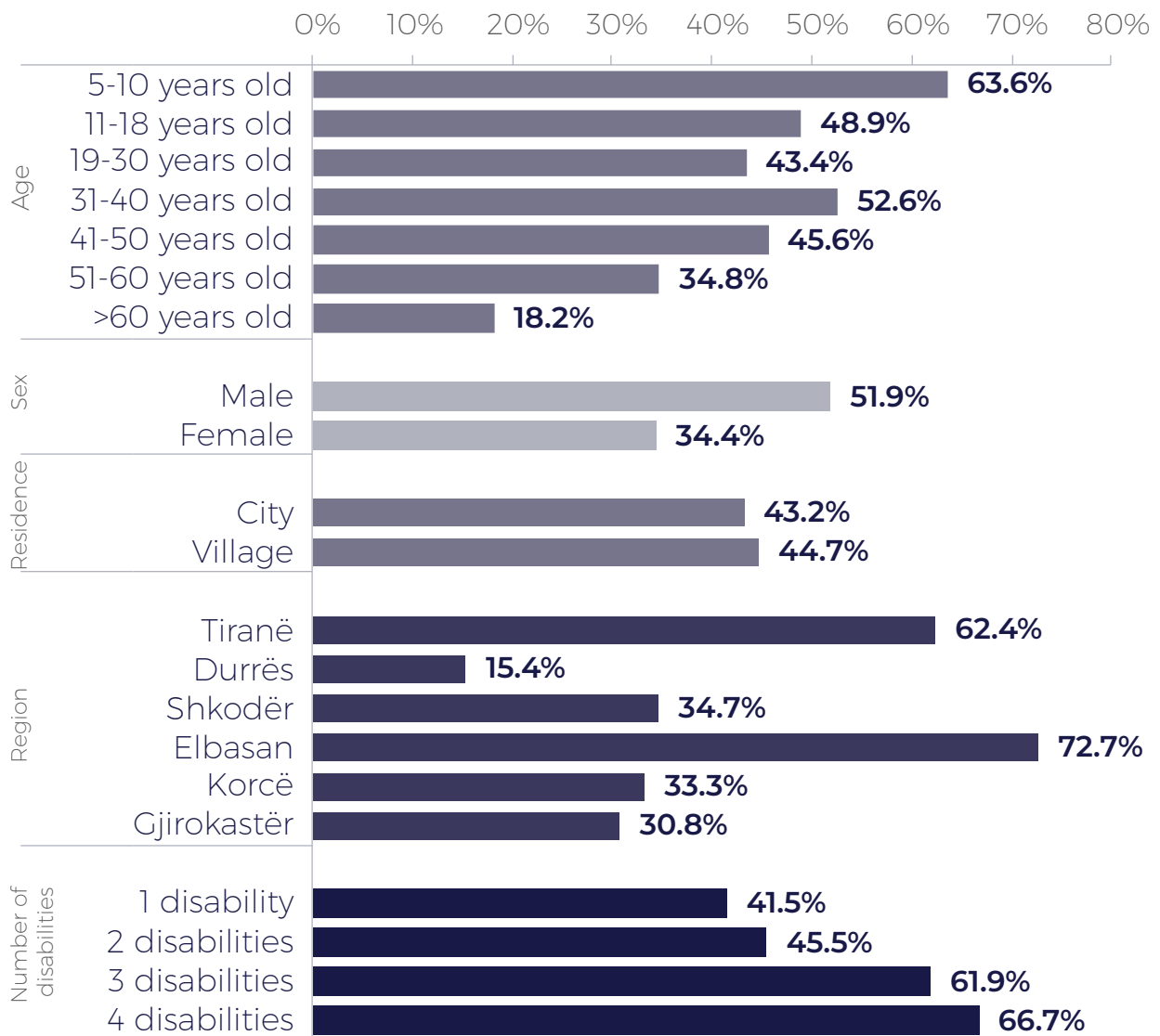
1.4.8. Effectiveness of outpatient care during the COVID-19 pandemic

People with disabilities included in the study were invited to share with us their opinion on the effectiveness of outpatient care during the COVID-19 pandemic period. More than four in ten (43.7%) participants with disabilities think that outpatient care during the pandemic has been ineffective or completely ineffective, 28.5% think that the effectiveness has been moderate and 27.8% think that outpatient care during the pandemic has been effective or very effective (Graph 32).



Graph 32. Opinion on the effectiveness of outpatient care during the pandemic

The percentage of PWDs or their caregivers who think that outpatient care during the pandemic has been completely ineffective or ineffective is higher among participants aged 5-10 (63.6%), among males (51.9%), among PWDs living in Elbasan (72.7%) and Tirana (62.4%), and increases with the increase in the number of disabilities: 41.5% among those with one disability, 45.5% among PWDs with two disabilities, 61.9% among PWDs with three disabilities and 66.7% among PWDs with four disabilities (Graph 33).



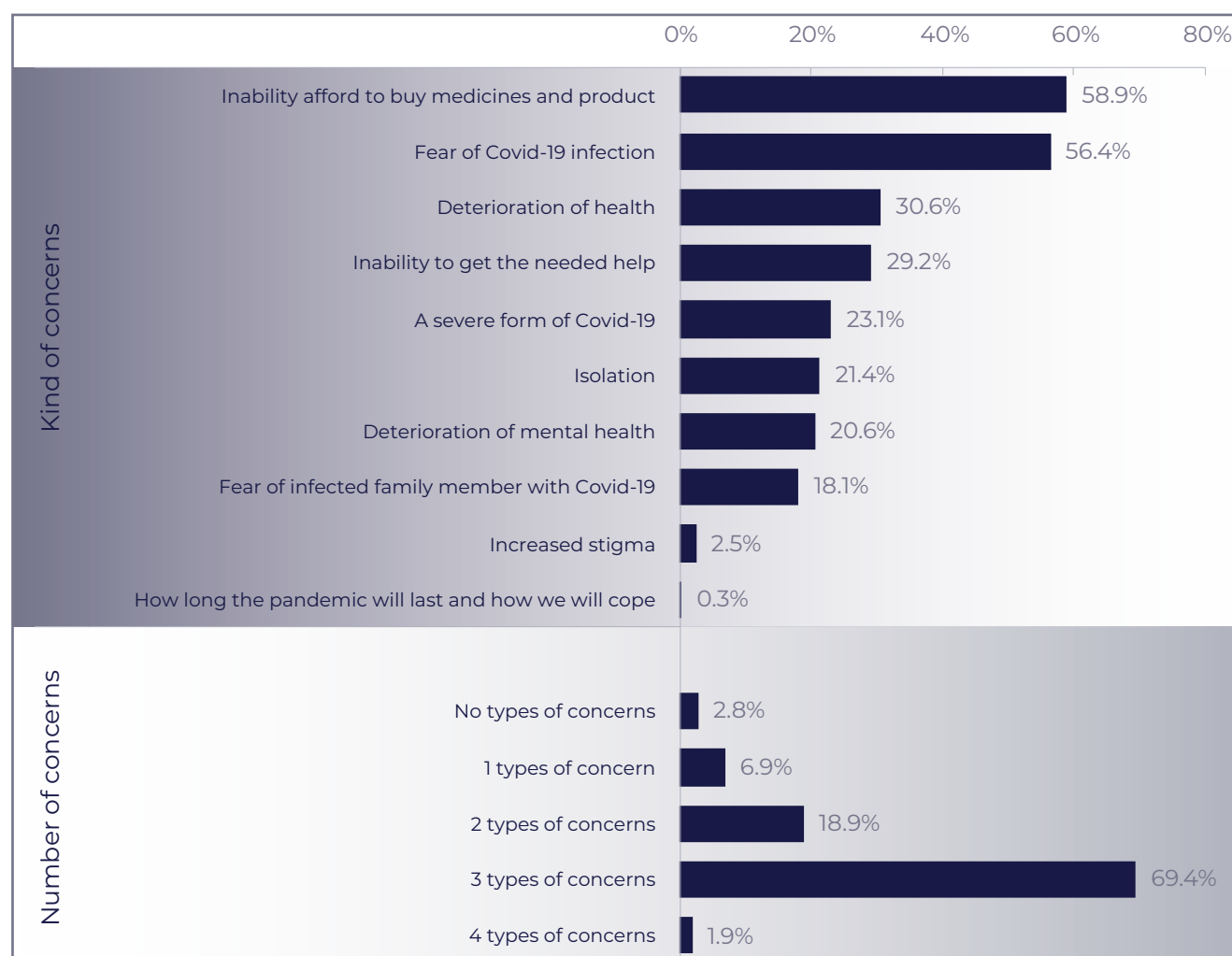
Graph 33. Percentage of PWDs who think that outpatient care during the pandemic was completely ineffective or ineffective, according to independent factors

1.4.9. The biggest concerns of PWDs during the pandemic period

Participants were invited to inform us about the biggest concerns they felt or experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

The most common major concern during the pandemic, reported by 58.9% of participants, was “financial inability to purchase medicines or food products”, followed by “fear of COVID-19 infection” in 56.4% of participants, worsening of the health condition” in 30.6% of cases, “not receiving the help needed ”in 29.2% of participants,“ transition to a severe form of Covid ” in 23.1% of cases, “fear of isolation” in 21.4% of cases, “deterioration of mental health” in 20.6% of cases, among other reasons (Graph 34).

Only 2.8% of participants reported that they had no specific concerns during the pandemic period, while over two-thirds (69.4%) had 3 types of concerns (Chart 34).

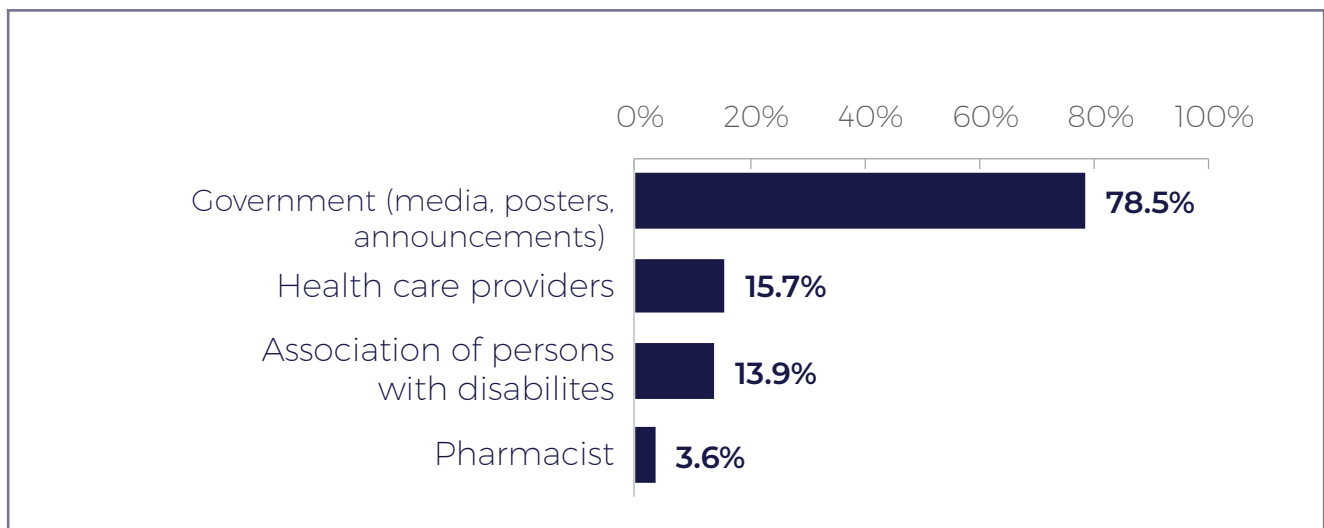


Graph 34. Major concerns of PWDs during the pandemic period

1.4.10. Specific guidelines for people with disabilities during the pandemic

Participants were asked about instructions they think they were given specific to them during the pandemic. The most common instruction, mentioned by 62.2% of participants, was “stay home and do not go out,” followed by “respect physical distance,” mentioned in 21.9% of cases, while other instructions, without specifying them, were reported by 3 subjects or 0.8% of all participants. A total of 274 people with disabilities, or 76.1% of all study participants, reported that they had received specific instructions, according to them, particular to people with disabilities, on coping with the pandemic. Among these, 88% received one type of instruction, 11.3% received two types of instruction and 0.7% received three types of instruction (these data are not presented in the Graph).

Among participants who received specific guidance for people with disabilities during the pandemic period, the main source of guidance was the Government (in 78.5% of cases), followed by health care providers (in 15.7% of cases), the Association of People with Disabilities (in 13.9% of cases) and the pharmacist in 3.6% of cases (Graph 35).

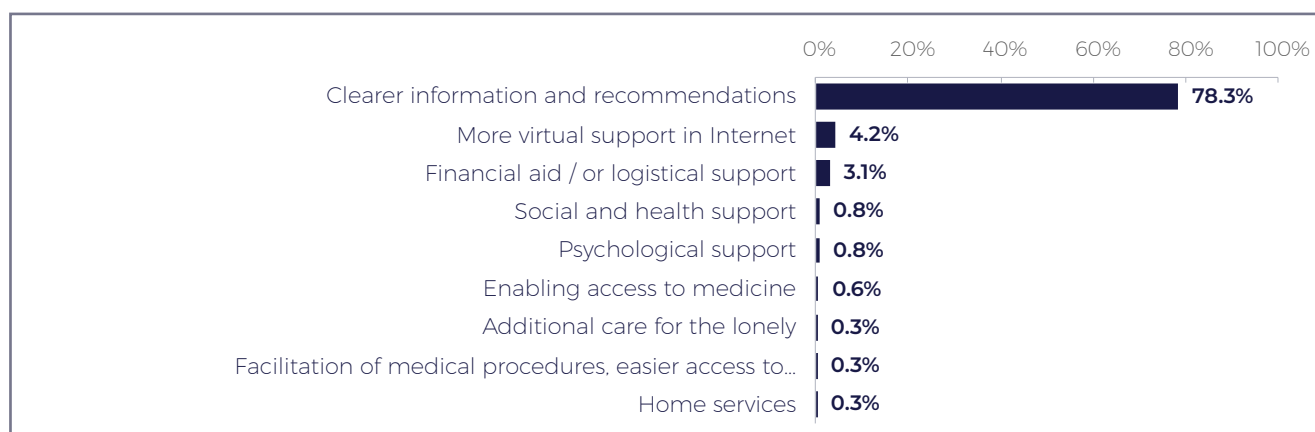


Graph 35. Sources of PWD-specific guidance during the pandemic period

1.4.11. Managing PWD during Pandemic

Participants were invited to give their opinion on some ways to better manage their situation during the pandemic as well as to give their free opinion about other ways they think are important.

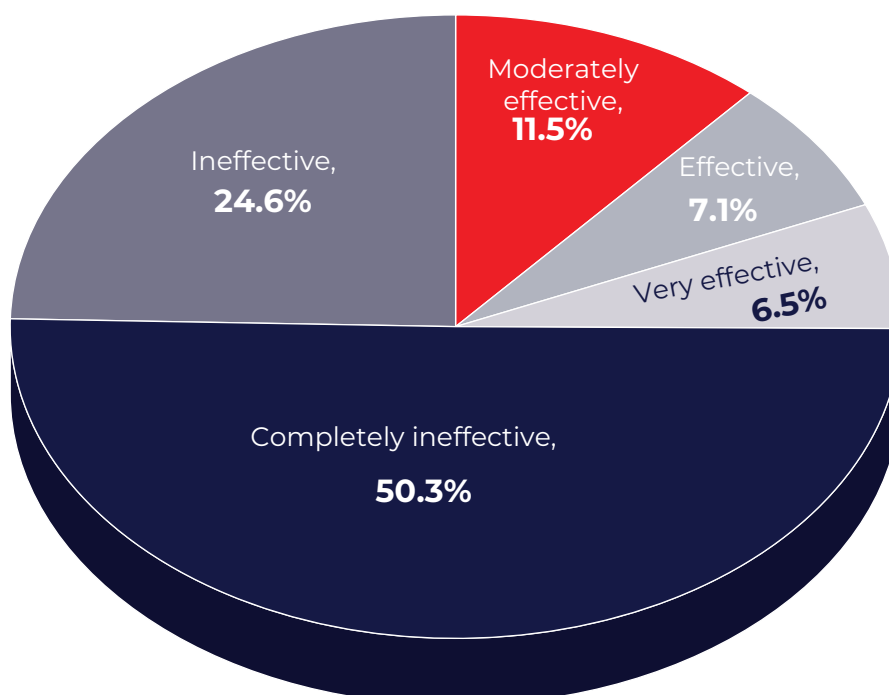
More than three quarters (78.3%) of the participants said that providing clearer information and guidance to PWDs would help better manage their situation during the pandemic, 4.2% were in favor of increasing support through online platforms (telephone, internet), 3.1% think that financial and logistical support would be appropriate in this regard, 0.8% suggested psychological support and equally suggested greater social and health support, while other suggestions included housing services (0.3%), enabling medicines (0.6%), facilitating medical procedures and easier access to a specialist doctor (0.3%), more care for the lonely (0.3%), and others (Graph 36).



Graph 36. Interventions to improve the management of the situation of people with disabilities during the pandemic

1.4.12. Effectiveness of the Government response in the treatment of COVID-19 for PWDs

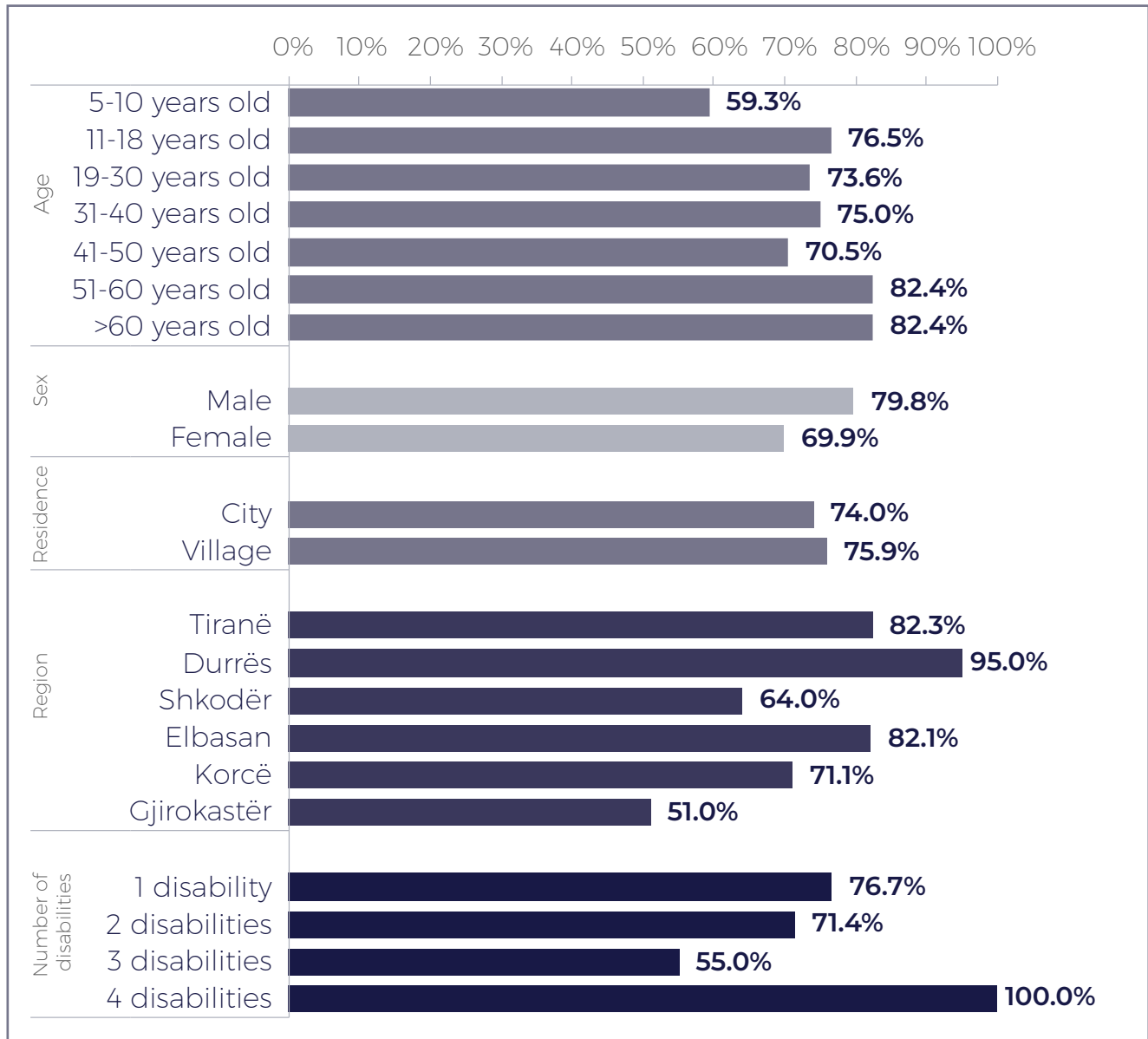
Three quarters (74.9%) of people with disabilities who participated in the study and who provided information think that the Government response to the treatment of COVID-19 for them has been completely ineffective (50.3%) or ineffective (24.6%), 11.5% think that the Government was moderately effective and others think it was effective (7.1%) or very effective (6.5%) [Chart 37].



Graph 37. Effectiveness of the Government response in the treatment of COVID-19 for PWDs

Graph 38 presents the percentages of participants who think that the Government response was completely ineffective or ineffective in treating COVID-19 for people with disabilities, according to independent factors in the study.

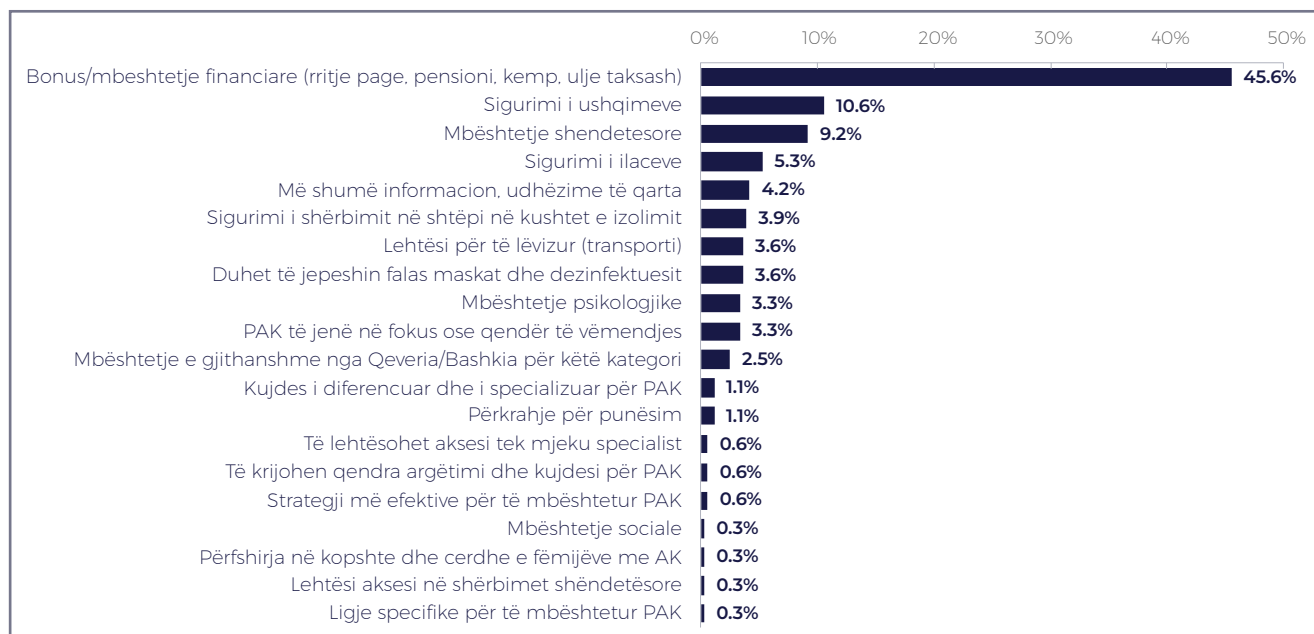
It can be noticed that the highest values of this indicator are found among persons over 50 years old (82.4%), men (79.8%), those living in rural areas (75.9%), in Durrës (95%), Tirana (82.3%) and Elbasan (82.1%), and to persons with 4 different types of disabilities (100%).



Graph 38. Effectiveness of the Government response in the treatment of COVID-19 for PWDs, by independent factors

Regarding the measures that should have been taken to support people with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic, the information obtained from the participants is presented in Chart 39 below.

The most frequently mentioned measure by the participants (45.6% of them) was “offering bonus/financial support such as salary increase, pension, camp, tax reduction, etc.”, followed by “food insurance” in 10.6% of cases, “health support” in 9.2% of cases, “provision of medicines” in 5.3% of cases, and “clearer information and instructions” in 4.2% of cases, etc.

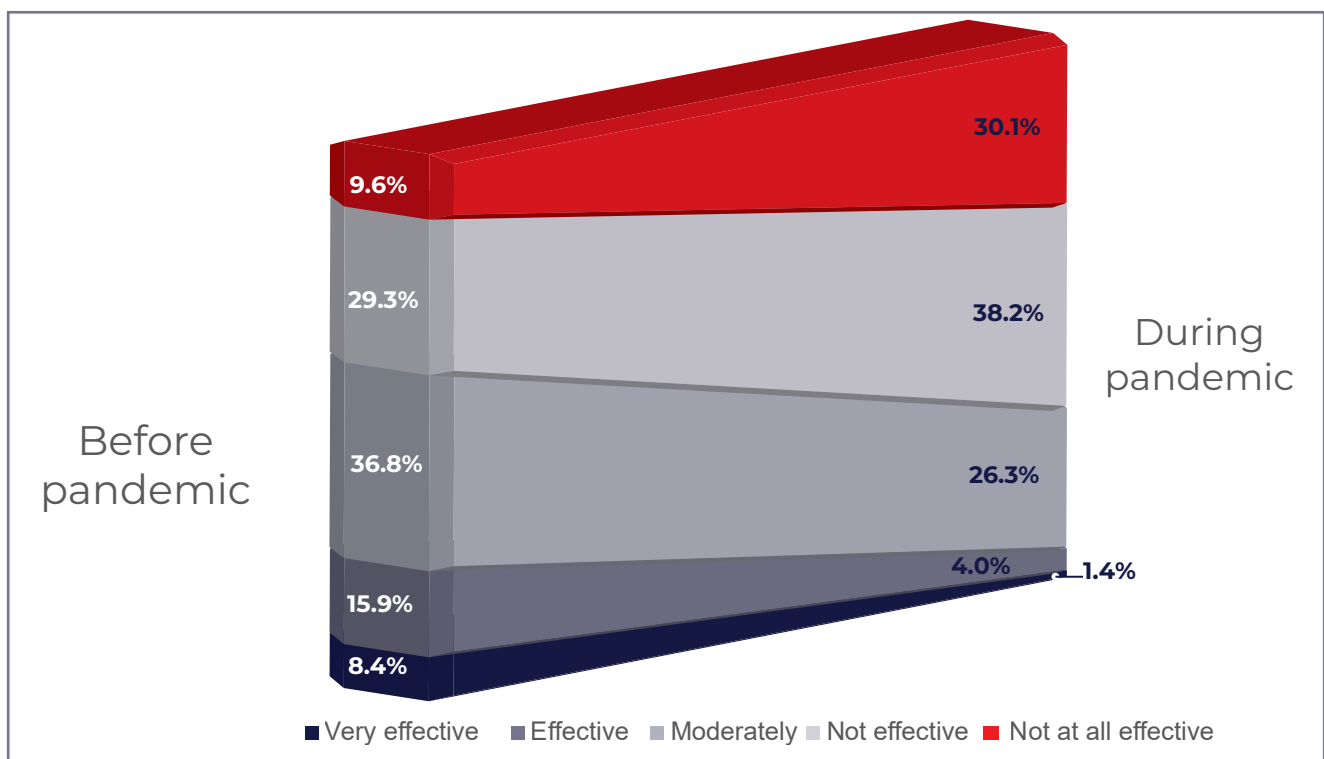


Graph 39. Measures to be taken to support PWDs during the COVID-19 pandemic

1.4.13. Assess personal abilities to manage oneself before and during the pandemic

Participants were invited to assess their own abilities to manage themselves before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their evaluation is presented in Graph 40.

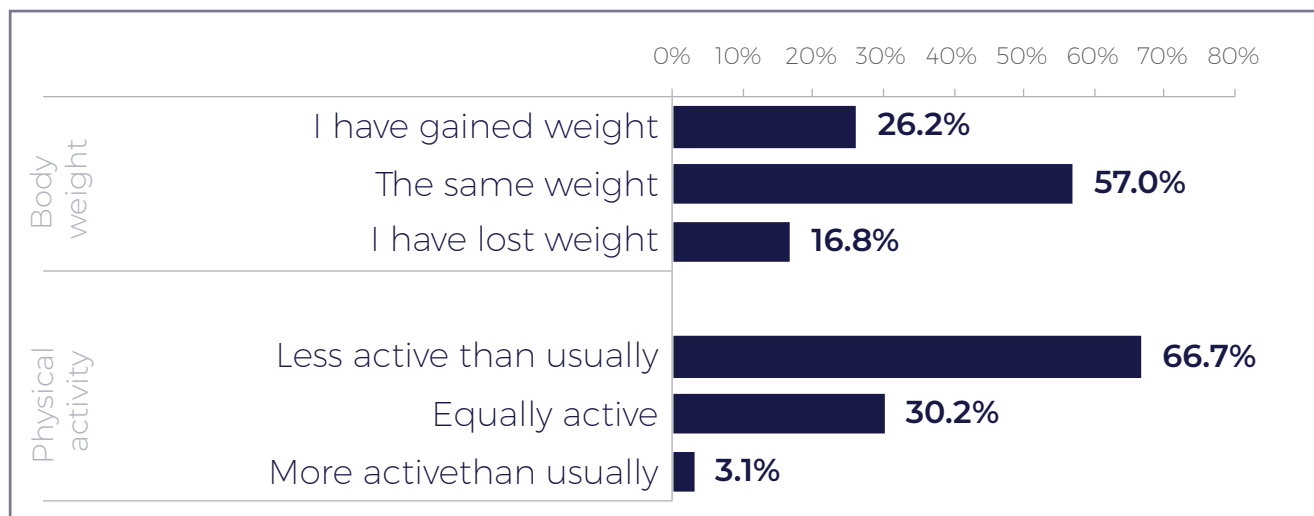
Unfortunately, the proportion of people with disabilities (or their caregivers) who think their ability to manage themselves is not at all effective or ineffective increases during the pandemic compared to the pre-pandemic period. For example, before the pandemic 9.6% of people with disabilities felt that their skills were not at all effective in managing themselves before the pandemic but during the pandemic this figure goes to 30.1%; likewise, before the pandemic 29.3% thought that their skills were ineffective in managing themselves, while during the pandemic this proportion goes to 38.2%. On the other hand, during the pandemic, the percentage of people with disabilities who think they can manage themselves effectively or very effectively decreased significantly: from 24.3% before the pandemic to 5.4% during the pandemic (Chart 40).



Graph 40. Assessment of personal abilities to manage oneself before and during the pandemic

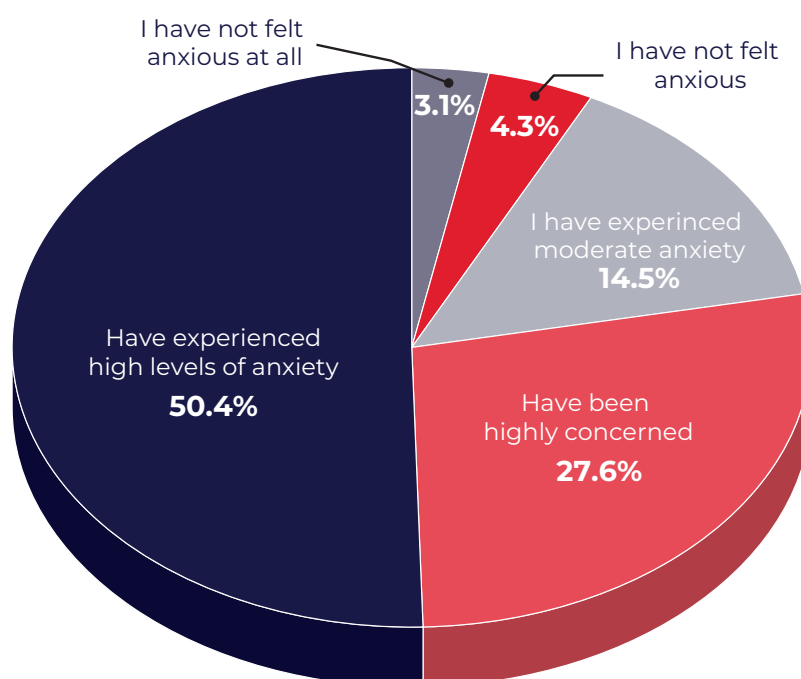
1.4.14. Physical activity, body weight and anxiety during the pandemic

Participants were asked about physical activity and body weight during the pandemic. Two-thirds (66.7%) of participants reported being less active than usual during the pandemic while more than a quarter (26.2%) reported that they had gained body weight (Chart 41).



Graph 41. Change in physical activity and body weight during the pandemic

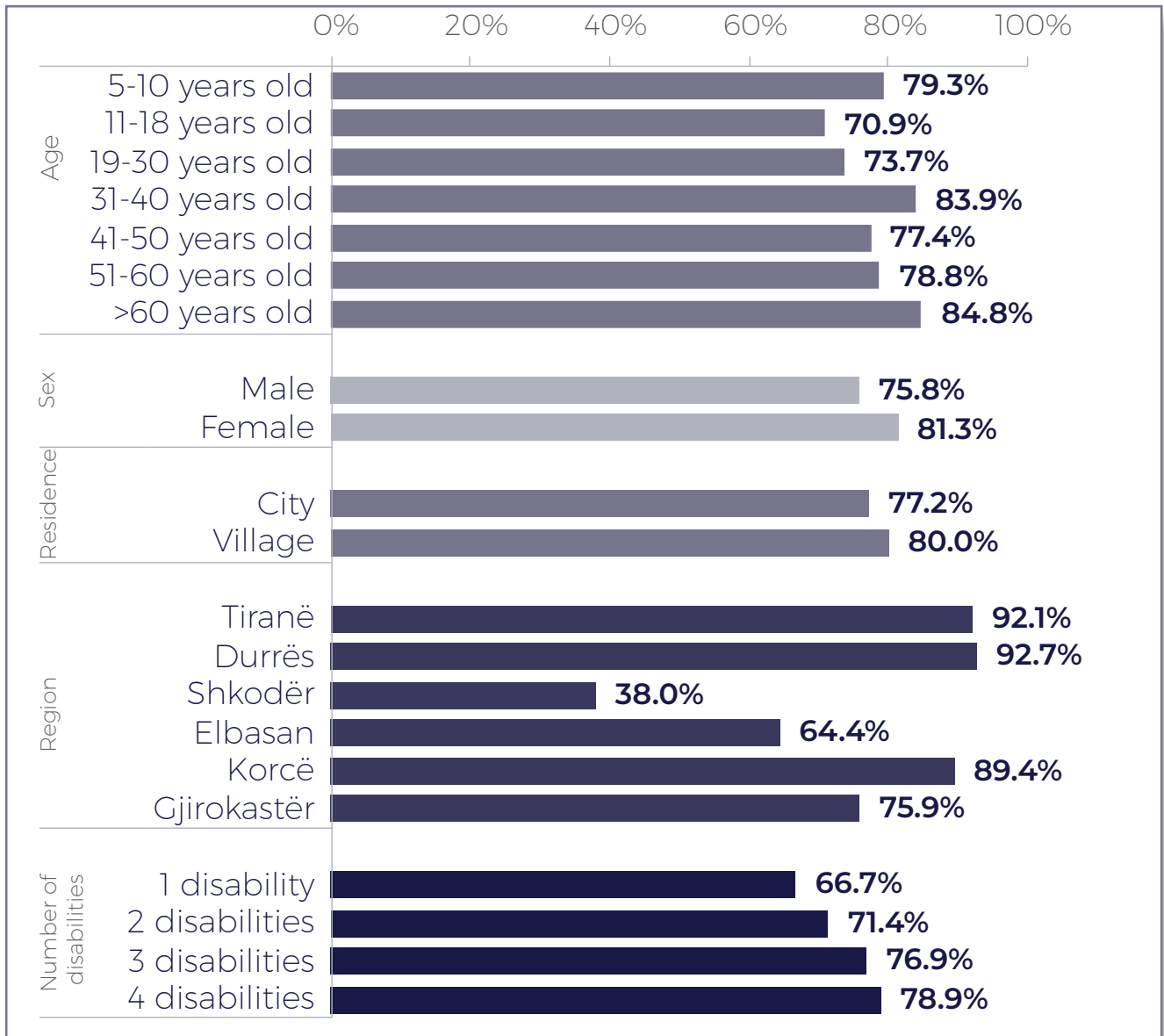
On the other hand, study participants were asked to rate the level of anxiety experienced during the pandemic on a scale from 1 (no anxiety at all) to 5 (I was very anxious). More than three quarters (78%) of people with disabilities have been very anxious (50.4%) or anxious (27.6%) during the pandemic, 14.5% have experienced moderate anxiety and only 7.4% have not felt anxious (4.3%) or have not felt at all anxious (3.1%) [Chart 42].



Grafiku 42. Anxiety levels experienced during the pandemic

Graph 43 shows the percentages of people with disabilities who have been very anxious or anxious during the pandemic, according to the independent factors included in the study.

It can be seen that the percentages of people with disabilities who have experienced high levels of anxiety during the pandemic are found in those aged > 60 years old (84.8%), in women (81.3%), in those living in rural areas (80%), in Durrës (92.7%), Tirana (92.1%) and Korca (89.4%), and increases with the number of disabilities present (from 66.7% in those with one disability to 78.9% in those with four types of disabilities)



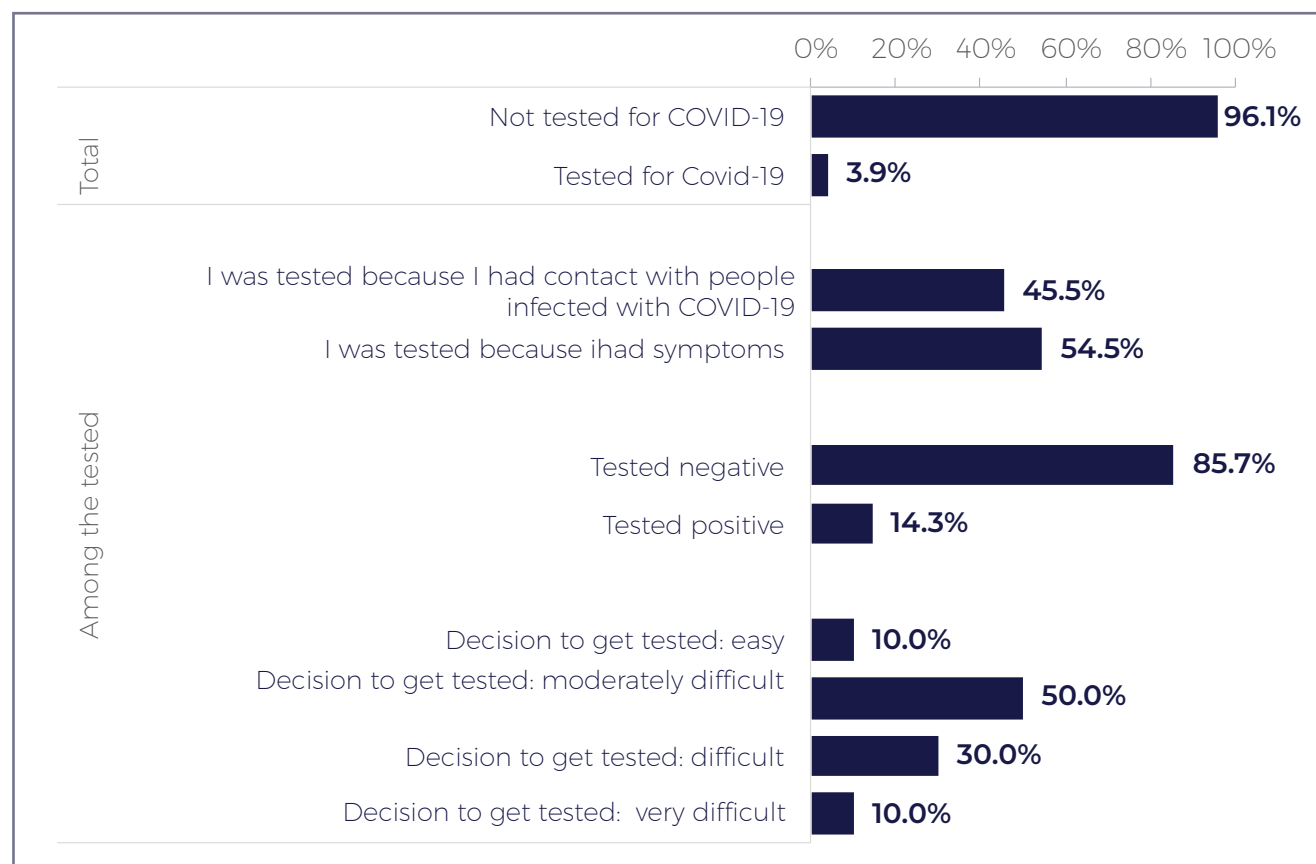
Graph 43. Proportions of PWDs who have experienced a lot of anxiety or have experienced anxiety (level 4) during the pandemic, according to independent factors

1.5. Testing for COVID-19

Participants were invited to inform us about their COVID-19 testing. Among the 360 subjects included in the study, only 14 or 3.9% of them stated that they had been tested.

Among those tested for COVID-19, 54.5% stated that the reason for the test was the presence of COVID-19 symptoms while 45.5% were tested due to contact with someone who had COVID-19.

Among the participants tested for COVID-19, 85.7% of them tested negative and 14.3% tested positive. For 40% of the people tested and who provided information, the decision to be tested for COVID-19, in the context of having symptoms and / or being aware that they had had contact with people affected by COVID-19, was difficult. or very difficult, in 50% of cases the testing was moderately difficult and in 10% of the cases the decision to be tested was easy (Chart 44).



Graph 44. Data related to testing for COVID-19 among study participants

None of the test subjects agreed to be hospitalized to treat a COVID-19 infection.



CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results presented above, the conclusions of this study are as follows:

1.6. The general situation of people with disabilities

- More than half of people with disabilities (PWDs) experience great difficulty in performing daily tasks.

1.7. Economic challenges of People with Disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic

- Among PWDs of working age, about one fifth of them are full-time or part-time employees. This is a very low percentage in the context when public institutions and private enterprises have a legal obligation to employ people with disabilities.
- Half of full-time or part-time employees are uninsured; this further increases their uncertainty about the future as it puts them in an even more disadvantaged position.
- The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have hit PWD particularly hard in employment as about one-fifth of them lost their jobs and two-fifths were temporarily laid off.
- The negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the employment of people with disabilities generally affect all study groups: over 60% of women and men, people with disabilities aged 41-60, living in urban and rural areas, in Tirana, Durrës, Shkodra, and Korca, as well as PWDs with one or two types of disabilities who were employed before the pandemic, were suspended from work or lost their jobs during the pandemic.
- Preserving the job is not a guarantee for maintaining the level of income for PWDs in employment as for about 30% of them, the income was reduced during the pandemic as a result of salary reduction. In total, the COVID-19 pandemic reduced by 72.5% the incomes of employees with disabilities.
- Beyond employment, more than 8 in 10 PWDs have had direct financial problems as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The most affected groups are: males, the disabled in old age, in rural areas, in Durrës and Shkodër, and those with four types of disabilities.
- Declining incomes, inability to make a living, job loss, and increased needs for food, medicine, and detergents accounted for over 95% of all direct effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on PWDs who claimed to be affected financially from this pandemic.
- Add to these difficulties the fact that more than 9 out of 10 PWDs stated that they did not benefit from the Government's financial packages.
- In these conditions, the financial support of PWDs has come from various organizations or foundations (in 41% of cases), public institutions (in 25% of cases), and from family or relatives in 21% of cases.
- Combining assistance from the Government and other sources, it results that more than 1 in 5 PWDs did not receive support from any source during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most at risk of not receiving any support are people with disabilities > 60 years old, those who live in urban areas, Durrës, Elbasan and Korca and those with more than one disability.
- About 9 in 10 PWDs have experienced delays in disability payments during the pandemic, mainly due to late allocation of funds from the state budget, isolation, physical inability to withdraw the funds, among others.

1.8. Health status of PWDs and their treatment during the COVID-19 pandemic

- The situation and restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic led to a drastic decrease in the percentage of PWDs treated in residential, day, and community centers, and an increase in the percentage of PWDs treated in their homes, compared to the period before the pandemic, as well as in a discontinuation of treatment in 15% of cases. All of these changes may have led to the deterioration of the health condition of people with disabilities due to services missed.
- This may be supported by the fact that health deteriorated during the pandemic by about 4 in 10 PWDs, possibly reflecting a shift in services and treatment from specialized centers to in-home. Health deteriorated in higher percentages in PWDs 11-18 years old and 51-60 years old, in rural areas, in Durrës and Korca, and in those with 2-3 different disabilities.
- Health assistance during the pandemic was sought by over half of the disabled, and among the requests for assistance, the help of the family doctor was requested in about two thirds of the cases, implying that the family doctor was the main source of health assistance for the disabled during the pandemic.
- About one in four PWDs have had less than usual contact with a family doctor during the pandemic.
- About 17% of PWDs think that the health service deteriorated during the pandemic compared to the period before the pandemic, and this percentage is higher among 11-18 year olds and PWDs > 60 years old, men, PWDs living in rural areas, Shkodra, Korca and Elbasan and increases with the increase in the number of disabilities, reaching 100% among PWDs with four disabilities.
- During the pandemic, the percentage of PWDs who had difficulty accessing medicines increased significantly compared to the pre-pandemic period (70.4% during the pandemic vs. 38.1% before the pandemic), and this trend was present in every group of PWDs in the study. This finding suggests that all PWDs have been put under considerable pressure during the pandemic to access the medicines they need.
- Apparently, the aggressive information campaign and messages given about the pandemic, the restriction of public transport and the coordinated lack of financial support have created obstacles to providing the necessary medical resources during the pandemic for the vast majority of PWDs (more than 9 in 10 PWDs reported at least one barrier to obtaining medical supplies during the pandemic).
- The main way of medical consultation of PWDs during the pandemic was through the telephone or online (in 57% of cases) and face-to-face in 11% of cases, while about 33% did not receive medical consultation at all; the usefulness of face-to-face consultations was acknowledged by significantly higher percentages of PWDs compared to remote consultations.
- The main effect of the pandemic on the planned interventions for PWDs was the postponement or re-planning of the intervention (in about 70% of cases), the switch to remote consultation (21%), or the cancellation of the consultation in about 10% of cases. In 6 in 10 cases when the intervention was postponed, it was postponed for 3 months or more, with significant differences by counties.
- Outpatient care during the pandemic is perceived as completely ineffective or ineffective for more than 4 in 10 PWDs: the highest percentages are among PWDs

aged 5-10, men, those living in Elbasan and Tirana and increasing with an increasing number of disabilities.

- Almost all PWDs have experienced at least one specific concern during the pandemic, with the most common concerns being “financial inability to buy medicine and food,” “fear of infection,” “concern about deteriorating personal health,” and “fear of not receiving the necessary assistance.”
- More than 7 in 10 PWDs experienced high levels of anxiety (above average) during the pandemic, and this percentage was higher among PWDs > 60 years old, among women, those living in rural areas, Durrës, Tirana, Korça and increases with the increase in the number of disabilities.
- Over three-quarters of PWDs reported receiving specific instructions during the pandemic, where the dominant message was “do not leave the house,” followed by “respect physical distance.” The main source of guidance was the Government (in 79% of cases), and the role of health care providers and the Association of People with Disabilities has been small in this regard (16% and 14%, respectively).
- About 8 in 10 PWDs suggested that simply “providing clearer information and guidance to PWDs” would help better manage their situation during the pandemic.
- More than 7 in 10 PWDs think that the Government’s response to treating the pandemic for them has been completely ineffective or ineffective, with higher percentages of this indicator among PWDs > 50 years old, men, PWDs living in rural areas, Durrës, Tirana and Elbasan, and those with 4 types of disabilities.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, our recommendations are as follows:

- The law in force for respecting the employment quotas of PWDs in public and private institutions and covering them with insurance must be rigorously implemented.
- All people with disabilities should be provided with adequate financial support during the pandemic, with particular attention to the most vulnerable groups among them, thus enabling them to cope with living, and increased nutritional and medical needs during this difficult period.
- The role of other organizations, foundations and groups that can provide assistance and support to people with disabilities in the pandemic period should be encouraged and increased. Also, local government structures should be more active and present in support of PWDs, by organizing dedicated assistance/packages that respond to the needs of people with disabilities.
- Government financial packages must necessarily include PWDs regardless of their employment status because PWDs are one of the most vulnerable groups in society and at very high risk for the rapid deterioration of their financial, health and social situation in the time of a pandemic.
- All measures should be taken to avoid delays in the payment of disability during the pandemic, as this phenomenon affects almost all people with disabilities, further complicating their situation. This requires increased attention to PWDs.
- It is necessary to plan in advance how to continue providing health services to people with disabilities and to avoid the lack of specific services for them in pandemic periods as an effective measure to maintain their health status and non-interruption of treatment.
- In cases where is required that PWDs should be treated at home, protocols, relevant instructions and an effective system of information for PWDs, and medical consultations on the required procedures should be available to be performed by PWD themselves or their family members. Of course, special attention should be paid to the groups most at risk for poor health among people with disabilities, where people with a large number of disabilities (3-4 types of disabilities) and those over 60 are singled out.
- It is essential to train family physicians regarding the treatment of PWDs, their specific needs and the extra needs they have during a pandemic, and there is a need to strengthen the remote treatment capabilities of physicians as the family doctor is the main source of health care for PWDs during the pandemic.
- Given that a significant proportion of people with disabilities feel that online consultation is not very useful, it is necessary to find ways to make this process more effective for people with disabilities, as mentioned above. This may include genuine training sessions for health personnel on various aspects of this process, identifying appropriate distance consultation platforms, but also educating PWDs regarding distance consultation. These would also increase PWDs' confidence in their own ability to manage themselves during the pandemic.
- Efforts should be made to understand the reasons why a large number of PWDs consider outpatient care ineffective during the pandemic in order to take measures to improve this care in order to provide quality outpatient services for this group of the population.
- Great care must be taken in how messages and instructions are conveyed during the pandemic, as giving them aggressively and in an undifferentiated way can create misperceptions in different groups of the population or their excessive intimidation,

including PWDs, thus becoming unnecessary obstacles to the provision of medical supplies in this period.

- Thus, adapting messages during the pandemic to the needs and situation of certain population groups, including people with disabilities, would reduce their anxiety and concern about the situation and create hope for its improvement. Of course, this can only work through a good coordination of all state and society structures, taking appropriate measures and providing effective support to all groups of the neediest population. The institutions that can be engaged in fulfilling this recommendation are: the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, the Institute of Public Health and civil society organizations that have as the object of their work the health education of the population.
- We recommend that much more should be offered to PWDs in informing and instructing them on how to manage themselves during the pandemic than just generic messages like “do not leave the house” and “respect physical distance” which are simply insufficient, ineffective and not specific to PWDs in this regard. These messages only work if the right infrastructure for the effective delivery of medical advice is in place and if appropriate financial and social support is provided. Institutions that can be engaged in fulfilling this recommendation are: the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, and the Institute of Public Health, through cooperation with national televisions.
- We think that appropriate guidance should be given in a language understandable to PWDs for another reason: to increase their confidence in their own ability to manage themselves during the pandemic, an indicator that deteriorated greatly during this period. The Ministry of Health and Social Protection in all special issues for the ongoing measures and daily communications for new cases of those infected with COVID-19 must adapt communications into a language understandable to people with disabilities.
- If the respective government structures fail to effectively follow the appropriate instructions for PWD during the pandemic period, the capacities of the Associations representing People with Disabilities should be strengthened.
- Finally, it is necessary to further investigate in more depth the geographic and socio-demographic differences (among regions) related to numerous indicators of health, financial and medical treatment of people with disabilities during the pandemic and to find the causes of these differences to address them appropriately and to improve the situation for this category.

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