

Loneliness and social isolation in older adults are serious public health risks affecting a significant number of people in the United States and putting them at risk for dementia and other serious medical conditions.

A new report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) points out that more than one-third of adults aged 45 and older feel lonely, and nearly one-fourth of adults aged 65 and older are considered to be socially isolated. Older adults are at increased risk for loneliness and social isolation because they are more likely to face factors such as living alone, the loss of family or friends, chronic illness, and hearing loss.

Loneliness is the feeling of being alone, regardless of the amount of social contact. Social isolation is a lack of social connections. Social isolation can lead to loneliness in some people, while other feel lonely without being socially isolated.

Recent studies found that:

- Social isolation significantly increased a person's risk of premature death from all causes, a risk that may rival those of smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity.
- Social isolation was associated with about 50% increased risk of dementia.
- Poor social relationships (characterized by social isolation or loneliness) was associated with a 29% increased risk of heart disease and a 32% increased risk of stroke.
- Loneliness was associated with higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide.
- Loneliness among heart failure patients was associated with a nearly 4 times increased risk of death, 68% increased risk of hospitalization, and 57% increased risk of emergency department visits.

What can you do if you are experiencing loneliness? Your medical provider can assess your risk for loneliness and social isolation and get you connected to community resources for help, if needed. The following organizations also offer helpful resources:

- Area Agency on Aging (AAA). A network of over 620 organization across America that provides information and assistance with programs including nutrition and meal programs (home-delivered or group meals), caregiver support, and more. Contact your local AAA at (208)-522-5391 and see what resources, classes and activities are offered.
- Eldercare Locator. A free national service that helps find local resources for seniors such as financial support, caregiving services, and transportation. It includes information that shows how volunteering can help keep you socially connected.
- National Council on Aging. Works with nonprofit organizations, governments, and businesses to provide community programs and services. It includes the Aging Mastery Program® that is shown to increase social connectedness and healthy eating habits.
- AARP. Provides helpful information to seniors to help improve quality of life and provides access to Community Connection Tools.
- Fit and Fall Proof. Participate and volunteer with the group exercise program. Visit EIPH.idaho.gov for a class schedule or call Timalee for more information. Classes are anticipated to begin again mid-April 2021. Currently no classes are being held due to COVID-19 restrictions.

