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Loneliness and Social Isolation — Tips for Staying Connected

[Español](#)

Everyone needs social connections to survive and thrive. But as people age, they often find themselves spending more time alone. Being alone may leave older adults more vulnerable to [loneliness and social isolation](#), which can affect their health and well-being. Studies show that loneliness and social isolation are associated with higher risks for health problems such as [heart disease](#), [depression](#), and [cognitive decline](#).

If you are in poor health, you may be more likely to be socially isolated or lonely. If you are socially isolated or feeling lonely, it can put your physical and mental health at risk. Adults who are lonely or socially isolated tend to be less healthy, have longer hospital stays, are readmitted to the hospital more often, and are more likely to die earlier than those with meaningful and supportive social connections.

What is the difference between loneliness and social isolation?

The number of older adults age 65 and older is growing, and many are socially isolated and regularly feel lonely.

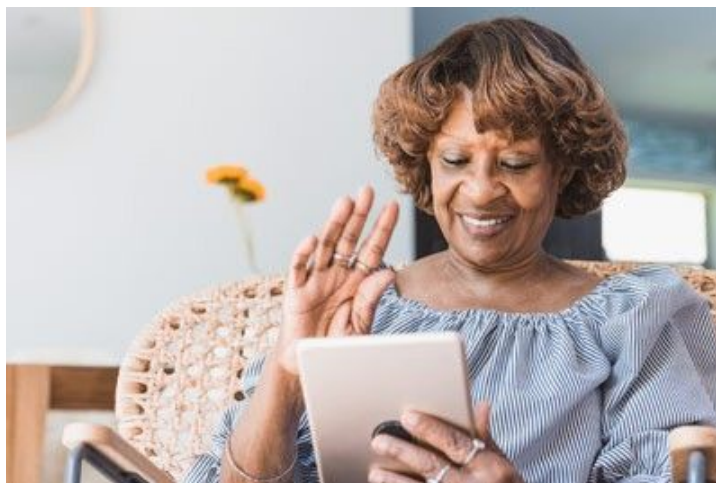
Loneliness and social isolation are different, but related.

Loneliness is the distressing feeling of being alone or separated. Social isolation is the lack of social contacts and having few people to interact with regularly. You can live alone and not feel lonely or socially isolated, and you can feel lonely while being with other people.

Older adults are at higher risk for social isolation and loneliness due to changes in health and social connections that can come with growing older, hearing, vision, and memory loss, disability, trouble getting around, and/or the loss of family and friends.



[Read and share this infographic](#) and spread the word about ways that may help foster healthy aging.



How can feeling lonely or being isolated affect older adults' health?

People who are socially isolated or lonely are more likely to be admitted to the emergency room or to a nursing home. Social isolation and loneliness also are associated with higher risks for:

- [High blood pressure](#)
- [Heart disease](#)
- [Obesity](#)
- Weakened immune function
- Anxiety
- [Depression](#)
- [Cognitive decline](#)
- [Dementia](#), including [Alzheimer's disease](#)
- Death

Spread the word about social isolation

View the [Social Isolation and Loneliness Outreach Toolkit](#) for social media images and posts, animated graphics (GIFs), educational materials, and more.

People who are lonely or socially isolated may get [too little exercise](#), drink [too much alcohol](#), smoke, and [sleep poorly](#), which can further increase the risk of serious health conditions.

People who are lonely experience emotional pain. Losing a sense of connection and community can change the way a person sees the world. Someone experiencing chronic loneliness may feel threatened and mistrustful of others.

Emotional pain can activate the same stress responses in the body as physical pain. When this goes on for a long time, it can lead to chronic inflammation (overactive or prolonged release of factors that can damage tissues) and reduced immunity (ability to fight off disease). This raises your risk of chronic diseases and can leave a person more vulnerable to some infectious diseases.

Social isolation and loneliness may also be bad for brain health. These have been linked to poorer cognitive function and higher risk for [dementia](#), including [Alzheimer's disease](#). Also, too little social activity and being alone often may make it more difficult to perform everyday tasks such as driving, paying bills, taking medicine, and cooking.

Need help with social isolation or feeling lonely?

The [Eldercare Locator](#) connects the public to trustworthy local support resources for older adults and their families. This resource links those who need assistance with state and local agencies on aging, as well as community-based organizations.

The Eldercare Locator is also available via phone at 800-677-1116.

Are you at risk for social isolation and loneliness?

Certain factors may increase your risk of social isolation and loneliness. These include:

- Loss of mobility
- [Vision](#) or [hearing problems](#)
- Psychological or cognitive challenges
- Feeling a lack of purpose
- Financial struggles
- Living alone
- Lack of transportation
- Inability to leave home without help
- A major life change, such as the [death of a family member](#) or retirement
- Separation from friends or family
- Lack of social support
- [Caring for a loved one](#) who is unwell
- Living in a rural, unsafe, or hard-to-reach neighborhood
- Experiencing discrimination based on age, racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, or gender identity
- Language barriers

Loneliness, social isolation, and hearing loss

People with [hearing loss](#) may find it hard to have conversations with friends and family. Older people who can't hear well may become depressed or withdrawn from others because they feel frustrated or embarrassed about not understanding what is being said. Sometimes, older adults are mistakenly thought to

be confused, unresponsive, or uncooperative when the reality is that they don't hear well.

Difficulties communicating with others can lead to less interaction with people, social isolation, and higher rates of loneliness.

Hearing problems that are ignored or untreated can get worse. If you think you might have a hearing problem, talk with a doctor. Hearing aids, therapy, certain medicines, and surgery are some

Stay Connected to Combat Loneliness and Social Isolation



How can you talk with your doctor about loneliness and social isolation?

If you are feeling isolated or lonely a lot of the time, you may want to tell your doctor or another health care professional. Talking about your health with your doctor means sharing information about how you feel physically, emotionally, and mentally. Describing your symptoms and concerns can help your doctor identify the problem. For example, let your doctor know about any major changes or stresses in your life, such as a divorce or the death of a loved one. A doctor who knows about your losses is better able to understand how you are feeling.

Be open and honest with your doctor about your health habits and what's happening in your life. It will help them to understand your medical conditions and emotional health more fully and recommend the best treatment options for you. Learn more about [talking with your doctor](#).

How can you stay connected with friends and family?

There are things you can do to help protect yourself or a loved one from the negative effects of loneliness and social isolation. First, it's important to take care of yourself. To help manage stress and stay as mentally and physically healthy as possible, try exercising, eating healthy, getting enough sleep (7 to 9 hours), and pursuing activities you enjoy.

Second, it's important to stay active and connect with others. People who engage in meaningful, productive activities they enjoy with others feel a sense of purpose and tend to live longer. For example, helping others through volunteering helps you feel less lonely and allows you to have a sense of mission and purpose in life, which is linked to better health. Studies show activities like these may help boost your mood and improve your well-being and cognitive function.

Here are some other ideas to help you stay connected.

- Find an activity that you enjoy, restart an old hobby, or take a class to learn something new. You might have fun and meet people with similar interests.
- Schedule time each day to stay in touch with family, friends, and neighbors in person, by email, social media, voice call, or text. Talk with people you trust and share your feelings. Suggest an activity to help nurture and strengthen existing relationships. Sending letters or cards is another good way to keep up friendships.
- Use communication technologies such as video chat or smart speakers to help keep you engaged and connected.
- If you're not tech-savvy, sign up for a class at your local public library or community center to help you learn how to use email or social media.
- Consider adopting a pet if you are able to care for one. Animals can be a source of comfort and may also lower stress and blood pressure.
- Stay physically active. Find ways to exercise with others, such as joining a walking club or working out with a friend. Adults should aim for at least 150 minutes (2 1/2 hours) of moderate-intensity activity each week.
- Introduce yourself to your neighbors.
- Find a faith-based organization where you can deepen your spirituality and engage with others in activities and events.
- Check out resources and programs at your local social service agencies, community and senior centers, and public libraries.
- Join a cause and get involved in your community.



[Read and share this infographic](#) and help spread the word about staying connected to combat loneliness and social isolation.



Credit: Victoria Ruvkun

Tips For staying connected if you are living alone with dementia

If you or a loved one has dementia and lives alone, family members, friends, or other caregivers may be able to help in different ways.

- **Identify a person you trust, such as a neighbor,** who can visit regularly in-person or via a video call and be an emergency contact.
- **Learn about home- and community-based support and services** from social service agencies, local nonprofits, and Area Agencies on Aging.
- **Stay connected with family and friends** through video chats, email, and social media. If you're not tech savvy, ask for help to learn.
- **Talk with others who share common interests.** Try a support group online or in person. Maybe your community has a memory café you can visit — a safe place to enjoy activities and socialize for people living with memory loss and their families and

You may also be interested in

- Getting ideas for [participating in activities you enjoy as you age](#)
- Finding [tips for healthy aging for the older adults in your life](#)
- Reading about [how to talk to your doctor about sensitive issues](#)

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For more information about loneliness and social isolation

NIA Alzheimer's and related Dementias Education and Referral (ADEAR) Center

800-438-4380

adear@nia.nih.gov

www.nia.nih.gov/alzheimers

The NIA ADEAR Center offers information and free print publications about Alzheimer's and related dementias for families, caregivers, and health professionals. ADEAR Center staff answer telephone, email, and written requests and make referrals to local and national resources.

AmeriCorps Seniors

800-942-2677

www.nationalservice.gov/programs/senior-corps

Eldercare Locator

800-677-1116

eldercarelocator@USAging.org

<https://eldercare.acl.gov>

HHS Office of the Surgeon General

Social Connection

877-696-6775

www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/priorities/connection/index.html

AARP

888-687-2277

877-434-7598 (TTY)

member@aarp.org

www.aarp.org

Connect2Affect

<https://connect2affect.org>

Family Caregiver Alliance

800-445-8106

info@caregiver.org

www.caregiver.org

Meals on Wheels America

888-998-6325

info@mealsonwheelsamerica.org

www.mealsonwheelsamerica.org

USAging

202-872-0888

info@uasging.org

www.usaging.org

National Council on Aging

571-527-3900

<https://www.ncoa.org/>

SilverSneakers

866-584-7389

support@silversneakers.com

www.silversneakers.com

YMCA

800-872-9622

fulfillment@ymca.net

www.ymca.net

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