Loneliness is public health problem which raises risk of stroke and heart disease

Loneliness should be treated as a public health issue, says researchers  CREDIT: ALAMY

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* [Sarah Knapton](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/authors/sarah-knapton/), science editor

19 APRIL 2016 • 11:30PM

Loneliness raises the risk of stroke significantly and should be treated as a public health problem like smoking or overeating, researchers have said.

In the biggest review into the subject ever carried out, the University of York looked at 23 studies involving 181,000 people for up to 21 years.

They found that [lonely people](https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwjixNqig5vMAhWCliwKHcexCqkQFggpMAI&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.telegraph.co.uk%2Fnews%2Fpolitics%2F10909524%2FBritain-the-loneliness-capital-of-Europe.html&usg=AFQjCNGTGr_2Ao1kUNVhTM8FtqhBUULpUg&bvm=bv.119745492,d.bGg) are around 30 per cent more likely to suffer a stroke or heart disease, two of the leading causes of death in Britain.

**“Addressing loneliness and social isolation may have an important role in the prevention of two of the leading causes of morbidity in high-income countries”**

*Dr Nicole Valtorta, University of York,*

Loneliness has already been linked to a compromised immune system, high blood pressure, and ultimately, premature death.

“The main finding of our review, that isolated individuals are at increased risk of developing CHD and stroke, supports public health concerns over the implications of social relationships for health and well-being,” said Dr Nicole Valtorta, Department of Health Sciences of the University of York.

“Our work suggests that addressing loneliness and social isolation may have an important role in the prevention of two of the leading causes of morbidity in high-income countries.

“Tackling loneliness and isolation may be a valuable addition to coronary heart disease and stroke prevention strategies. Health practitioners have an important role to play in acknowledging the importance of social relations to their patients.”

In January the [Local Government Association](https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwi8wdK_g5vMAhWEuxQKHUD2AhUQFggcMAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.local.gov.uk%2F&usg=AFQjCNHYRi1vr_WW5bGOrODG9JGNgNgoFw&bvm=bv.119745492,d.bGg) said loneliness should be treated as a ‘major health issue’, while charity Age UK claim the issue "blights the lives" of over a million older people.

But although loneliness is often viewed as a problem for older people, [a recent study by the Mental Health Foundatio](https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwjixNqig5vMAhWCliwKHcexCqkQFggfMAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.telegraph.co.uk%2Fwellbeing%2Fmood-and-mind%2Fnot-just-a-problem-for-old-people-why-the-young-are-lonely-too%2F&usg=AFQjCNHcPNG60ZXTg7v1Lb7sKGp58GPQiQ&bvm=bv.119745492,d.bGg)n found that 18 to 34 year olds were more likely to feel lonely more often than over-55s.

Last year scientists at the University of Chicago discovered that loneliness actually[triggers physical responses](https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwjixNqig5vMAhWCliwKHcexCqkQFgglMAE&url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.telegraph.co.uk%2Fnews%2Fscience%2Fscience-news%2F12012663%2FLoneliness-triggers-biological-changes-which-cause-illness-and-early-death.html&usg=AFQjCNEp54FDJekcXh3BO2dYrKwZl3aPQg&bvm=bv.119745492,d.bGg) in the body which make people sick.

Loneliness affects all ages, not just the elderly  CREDIT: ALAMY

Feeling lonely  activates the ‘fight or flight’ stress signal which affects the production of white blood cells. It also increases activity in genes which produce inflammation in the body while lowering activity in genes which fight off illness, promoting high levels of inflammation in the body.

Essentially, lonely people had a less effective immune response and more inflammation than non-lonely people. They feel socially threatened which has an enormous impact on health.

In a linked editorial to the latest research, Dr Julianne Holt-Lunstad of  [Brigham Young University](https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwib-PnOg5vMAhVLCSwKHTDeB9cQFggdMAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.byu.edu%2F&usg=AFQjCNEPt_zqXziU8TS92mkDMv8yiJoCZg&bvm=bv.119745492,d.bGg), Utah, USA said the issue should be addressed as a public health concern.

“Similar to how cardiologists and other healthcare professionals have taken strong public stances regarding other factors exacerbating cardiovascular disease, eg smoking, and diets high in saturated fats, further attention to social connections is needed in research and public health surveillance, prevention and intervention efforts,” she said.

Christopher Allen, Senior Cardiac Nurse for the [British Heart Foundation](https://www.google.co.uk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&cad=rja&uact=8&sqi=2&ved=0ahUKEwjRiOnVg5vMAhXCPRQKHS8CCPMQFggcMAA&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.bhf.org.uk%2F&usg=AFQjCNFmjIQpdev4tR-Ovdslf84oLCOSmw&bvm=bv.119745492,d.bGg), said: “Social isolation is a serious issue that affects many thousands of people across the UK. We know that loneliness, and having few social contacts, can lead to poor lifestyle habits such as smoking which can increase your risk of heart disease and stroke.

 “Although this observational study suggests a physiological link between loneliness and heart health problems, this is not a clear link and much more research is needed to understand if there truly is a relationship between the two.

 “It’s important for anyone affected by loneliness to remember that they can reach out to their GP for help and advice and also take further steps to improve their wellbeing such as joining a local community group or possibly volunteering in their free time.”

The research was published in the journal Heart.