Loneliness and isolation can increase risk of heart disease and stroke

LONELINESS and social isolation have been linked to a 30 per cent increased risk of having a stroke or developing heart disease, a new study has revealed.

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Researchers say the findings back public health concerns about the importance of people having regular social interactions to boost their health and wellbeing.

The study showed that loneliness and social isolation was associated with a 29 per cent increased risk of a heart or angina attack and a 32 per cent heightened risk of having a stroke.

Experts pooled information from 23 studies which involved more than 181,000 adults, 4,628 coronary heart disease events including heart attacks, angina attacks and death and 3,002 strokes. The monitoring periods for the studies ranged from three to 21 years.

In editorial linked to the study, Dr Julianne Holt-Lunstad and Dr Timothy Smith of Brigham Young University, Utah, USA, said: “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.

“With such rapid changes in the way people are interacting socially, empirical research is needed to address several important questions.

“Does interacting socially via technology reduce or replace face to face social interaction and or alter social skills?

“Given projected increases in levels of social isolation and loneliness in Europe and North America, medical science needs to squarely address the ramifications for physical health.

“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.”

Loneliness has already been linked to a compromised immune system, high blood pressure and premature death but a link between social isolation and loneliness and heart disease and stroke risk are only just being investigated.

Researchers say the findings are comparable to that of other recognised risk factors, such as anxiety and having a stressful job.

Christopher Allen, senior cardiac nurse for the British Heart Foundation, 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.

“Earlier BHF-funded research has shown an association between social isolation and increased risk of dying, and the BHF continues to fund research exploring how our mental health affects our risk of developing heart problems.

“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 study, called Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for coronary heart disease and stroke: systematic review and meta-analysis of longitudinal observational studies, is published in online journal Heart published by the BMJ.