

Older Adults & Social Isolation: The Other Epidemic

Evidence suggests social connection improves health and adds years to one's life by buffering against chronic conditions and disease!

Social isolation is a public health epidemic affecting American adults, including the older adult population. Numerous empirical studies have correlated the experience of social isolation with negative health outcomes, including increased rates of depression, chronic health conditions (e.g., heart disease, stroke, dementia), rehospitalization, suicidal ideation, and premature death.

Sources: Valtorta, et al., 2016; AARP, 2012

How can you help?

Hospitals and healthcare providers play a critical role in intervening in social isolation. They are in a position to connect patients with resources and develop long and short-term strategies with those resources that will benefit their well-being.

What is social isolation?

Social isolation is the objective experience of having diminished social connections as identified by reduced quality, type, frequency, and satisfaction with social interactions. The COVID-19 pandemic and the continued need for social distancing creates increased and more significant social isolation, especially for seniors. Data trends contend that older adults in Virginia will face these conditions and consequences for months to come. Social isolation may cause feelings of loneliness, the subjective sense of distress an individual has over not having enough social interaction. Approximately 25% of adults over age 50 and 16% of those over age 65 report regularly experiencing loneliness (DiJulio, et al., 2018).

What are the risk factors for social isolation?

There is no single predictor for social isolation. Risk factors can include, but are not limited to:

- Living alone
- Mobility impairment
- Sensory impairment
- Major life transitions
- Low socioeconomic status
- Being a caregiver
- Cognitive/psychological disability
- Residing within a rural environment
- Inaccessible neighborhoods
- Small social network, low social support
- Non-English speaking
- Life-changing events, such as change/loss of role, social network, physical/mental health, resources, etc.

Are there signs of social isolation?

The following are signs and symptoms associated with social isolation:

- Loss of interest in socializing or engaging in interests
- Dramatic weight loss, or changes in appetite
- Sleep disturbances
- Lethargy
- Changes in personal hygiene
- Cognitive decline
- Increased substance use
- Self loathing
- Increased physical symptoms (e.g., headaches, aches & pains, muscle tension)

Are there resources to help?

Yes! If you are concerned an older adult with whom you are interacting is at risk of or is experiencing social isolation, consider the following resources:

- **VirginiaNavigator** allows you to access electronic information on various programs and services available to older adults within your community, including socialization programs. You can search for local services via their website at www.virgininavigator.org.
- Contact your local **Area Agency on Aging** (AAA), which can connect individuals to local opportunities for socialization, including senior cafés, congregant meals, senior centers, and more. To locate your local AAA, visit the Virginia Association for Area Agencies on Aging at <http://vaaaa.org/> and click on the “Find Your AAA” tab.
- **2-1-1 Virginia** provides information on emergency supports, disaster assistance, and essential needs for individuals living within the community. Information can be searched on line by city or zip code at www.211.org, or you may contact the toll-free No Wrong Door line at **(888) 992-0959**.
- **AARP** provides a local assistance directory, which can be searched for free or reduced cost services that may combat or prevent social isolation. You can access this support at www.connect2affect.org.
- **The Friendship Line** by the Institute on Aging is both a crisis hotline and a warm line for non-emergency emotional support calls. It is available 24-hours a day and is the only accredited crisis line in the country for people ages 65+ and those living with disabilities. The Friendship Line can be accessed by calling their toll-free number at **(800) 971-0016**.
- **ADvancing States** developed the report, “**Addressing Social Isolation in Older Adults During the COVID-19 Crisis**,” as a means of providing healthcare workers thoughtful and creative approaches to addressing social isolation and loneliness in older adults.