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The Risks Of Social Isolation For Older Adults



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Socially-isolated older adults are likely to be sicker and die sooner, and have higher health care expenses, than seniors who retain their social connections. [A new study](#) by researchers from the AARP Public Policy Institute, Stanford University, and Harvard finds that Medicare spends an estimated \$6.7 billion more each year on seniors who have little social contact with others.

About 14% of study participants were identified as socially isolated, which meant they had little contact with adult children, other relatives, or friends. They were more likely to be male, white, live in cities, and have lower incomes and wealth than those with better social links. They were also more likely to have depression, difficulties managing daily activities, and have at least five chronic conditions. Interestingly, people who were married were just as likely to be isolated as singles. The study looked only at those 65 and older who were living in the community.

The study found that Medicare spent about \$1,600-a-year more on older adults who are socially isolated than those who are not. They were one-third more likely to require care in a skilled nursing facility, perhaps because they could not be safely discharged home after a hospitalization. And while they were no more likely to be hospitalized, their stays were more costly — also perhaps because they could not be discharged as quickly as others because they had no family supports.

More likely to die

And they were more one-third more likely to die within six years, even after taking into account health, demographic and functional status.

The study does not conclude that social isolation makes people sicker. It may be that they are more isolated because they are sicker. But either way, it suggests that if we could do a better job identifying isolation and take steps to provide supports for these older adults, we could both improve their well-being and save Medicare a significant amount of money.

While the study does not say so, it may also raise important issues for those who remain in their own homes rather than move to a senior community. Most older adults prefer to age in place, according to surveys. But living alone can itself be isolating, especially for those with mobility or cognitive limitations, or who cannot access transportation.

Other solutions

There are solutions. [Senior villages](#) can provide important social connections through volunteer visits and other resources. [Faith communities can be a source of social support](#) as well. However, they may have to work harder to maintain those links as seniors in their communities become more frail.

Another option is moving to a [community of older adults](#). Many resist the idea, for financial or other reasons. But well-run senior communities do create opportunities for residents to develop new friendships. There is no promise that such a move will reduce isolation, of course. Some older adults may remain alone in their apartments even if opportunities for social interaction are available. But it may help.

This study and others that show significant levels of social isolation among older adults also carry an important lesson for the adult children of aging parents. Get to you know your parents' friends and neighbors. If they notice things are changing, encourage them to tell you. If, for example, your mom is getting out less or has stopped going to her weekly bridge game, you may want to find out what is going on and try to address it.

As this study shows, social isolation may not only be linked to depression or functional limitations, it may be tied to more health issues and even death.

