

Pacific Regional Centre for Healthy Aging

What is Social Isolation?

Health Impact

Aging and Isolation

Prevention

Who's at Risk?

How to Help?

Statistics

Resources

Social Isolation

What is Social Isolation?

Social isolation describes a situation where someone doesn't have very many social contacts and feels lonely.

As people age, they often find themselves spending more time alone. This is not just a social problem—it can affect our well-being and our mental and physical health. Everyone needs social contact to stay healthy.

Health Impacts of Social Isolation

Loneliness and social isolation in older adults can lead to

- Frailty
- Malnutrition
- Depression and anxiety
- Early death
- A decrease in physical ability
- A decrease in mental ability
- An increase in habits such as drinking, smoking, and spending too much time sitting

Socially isolated older adults have

- a higher likelihood of falls
- a four-to-five times greater risk of going into hospital
- a 50% higher risk of dementia

Adults who are socially isolated have longer hospital stays and end up back in the hospital more often than those with meaningful and supportive social connections.

Research also shows that loneliness is connected to health conditions such as higher blood pressure, heart disease, inflammation, and obesity.

Understanding and preventing social isolation and loneliness is a good way to improve older adults' physical and mental health.

Why is Social Isolation a Challenge for Older Adults?

As we age, many things can happen that can make us less socially active:

- Physical limits—moving around becomes more difficult
- Hearing and vision loss
- Chronic health conditions—often more than one
- The loss of family and friends
- Separation from long-term friends and family because of moving into a care home or retirement community

How to Protect Against Social Isolation

1. Start with prevention

It's often easier to maintain friendships than to create new ones. Make it a priority now to stay socially connected. Notice if your social circles are getting smaller and if so, take action.

2. Stay healthy

If you are in poor health, you may be more likely to be socially isolated and lonely. And if you are socially isolated, that can make you less healthy. Help prevent this cycle by

- staying active
- eating well
- getting enough sleep
- getting your hearing and vision tested regularly
- seeing health care providers when needed

3. Know and use community resources

Almost every community in B.C. has a seniors' centre or community centre and other options for social connection. See the [Resources](#) section below to find out what is available in your neighbourhood.

3. Deepen friendships you already have

Making new friends can be very satisfying, but it's not the only way to get socially connected. Strengthening existing friendships can also help. Look for ways to turn acquaintances into friends and build more closeness into casual friendships.

4. Give back

Volunteering is a great way to make a difference, meet people, and become part of a caring community. Older adults are valued volunteers and there are many [opportunities](#) available. Volunteering can happen informally, like checking in on a neighbour who might need help or cooking a meal for someone.

5. Get involved in community

Join a cause, group, or activity based on what you believe in. Depending on your personal beliefs, a faith-based organization can connect you to a caring community. You might join an environmental organization or another cause that your care about.

6. Explore transportation alternatives

If you don't drive, try using public transit to get out and about. B.C. Transit offers a [Community Travel Training service](#). This service connects you to a trainer who will help you figure out public transit. They will focus on your travel needs. Also, B.C. Transit offers an [orientation program](#) that teaches people how to board a bus with a wheelchair, walker or scooter. To find these programs, click on the links or call 250-545-7221.

7. Use technology

Getting together in person is best, but video chats, phone calls, email, and social media help meet some social needs. If you are not confident with technology, sign up for a class at your local library or community centre, or ask a young person in your neighbourhood for a lesson.

8. Talk to your health care provider

Doctors and other health care workers understand that social isolation is a health issue. They can listen to you and suggest actions based on your situation and personality.

Who is Most at Risk of Social Isolation?

Researchers have studied social isolation and found that certain situations and behaviours put some people more at risk.

Social isolation is a bigger problem for older adults who face

Physical isolation and lack of access to support

- They live alone
- They don't have the language skills needed to find and get services
- They lack access to transportation, health, and community services

Challenging life and health situations, such as people who

- Live with low income
- Lack safe, secure housing
- Have more than one chronic health problem
- Are members of vulnerable communities such as immigrant, LGBTQ+, or Indigenous

- Have lower levels of formal education
- Experience life transitions such as retirement, death of a spouse, or losing a driver's license
- Are caregivers

How to Help

Friends, family members, and caregivers can play a role in preventing social isolation. If you see someone you care about becoming socially isolated, you can help:

- Spend time with them
- Connect them to activities and programs in the community
- If you can, let them know you are available for practical support like mowing the lawn, taking them to a medical appointment, or being on-call for emergencies
- Use the resources listed below or ask people in the neighbourhood what's available, and share this information

Follow-Up is Essential

Your help can be more effective if you stay involved. Don't just tell someone about a resource—hand them the phone and sit with them while they call. Or drive them to an event. Check in with later them to ask if they've followed up on a suggestion, signed up for a program, or made an appointment. Talk to them a few weeks later to see if they've continued. This will help turn information into action.

The Power of Community

Most of us are familiar with the saying, "It takes a community to raise a child." People are also learning that it takes a community to keep our older adults healthy. Just stopping to chat with a neighbour can make a difference.

Social Isolation by the Numbers

- 1 in 5 Canadians say they feel lonely
- 40% of older adults experience loneliness
- Approximately 50% of people over the age of 80 report feeling lonely
- 15% of adults 65 years or older and living in the community suffer from depression
- 44% of adults 65 or older living in residential care have been diagnosed with depression or showed symptoms of depression without diagnosis

Resources

Community Programs and Services

[BC 211](#)

211 British Columbia is a free, confidential service that connects people to helpful resources in their community. It operates all day and night and provides advice in over 240 languages.

Call 2-1-1 anytime, or go to their [website](#) to search their on-line directory.

[Social Connections \(Community Resources for Seniors\)](#)

This Province of British Columbia website provides links to places and programs that help older adults find social connection. It includes libraries, volunteer opportunities, sports associations, cultural centres, and more.

[Pathways Community Services Directory](#)

This website lets you search for health and community programs according to your location.

[55+ BC Games](#)

The 55+ BC Games, formerly the BC Seniors Games, give those aged 55+ the chance to compete in events ranging from dragon-boating and ice hockey to cribbage and one-act plays.

Read More

[HealthLinkBC: Build Positive Relationships](#)

[HealthLinkBC: Social Connections](#)

[Canadian Frailty Network: Interact](#)

Explores the connection between loneliness and frailty and provides recommendations.

Resources for Immigrants and Newcomers

[Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia](#)

Resources for First Nations and Indigenous People

[Aboriginal Friendship Centres](#)

Find a friendship centre near you.

[B.C. Elders Communication Society](#)

An organization dedicated to ensuring that B.C.'s First Nations Elders all know that they are valued, that their legacy will be preserved, and that their feelings and culture matter.

[Keeping Our Nlakapamux Elders at Home](#)

Read about an initiative to keep elders engaged in their community.

Resources for LGBTQ+ People

[QMUNITY](#)

A British Columbia organization dedicated to improving queer, trans, and Two-Spirit lives through services, connection, and leadership.