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# Loneliness Isn't Just Bad for Your Health—It's Deadly

People who report often feeling lonely or being socially isolated are at an increased risk of death from any cause, new research suggests

By **Brianna Abbott** [Follow](#) | *Photographs by John Taggart for The Wall Street Journal*

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If you think canceling plans is always good self-care, you might want to think again. People who keep an active social calendar not only enjoy a better quality of life—they could also stave off an early trip to the grave.

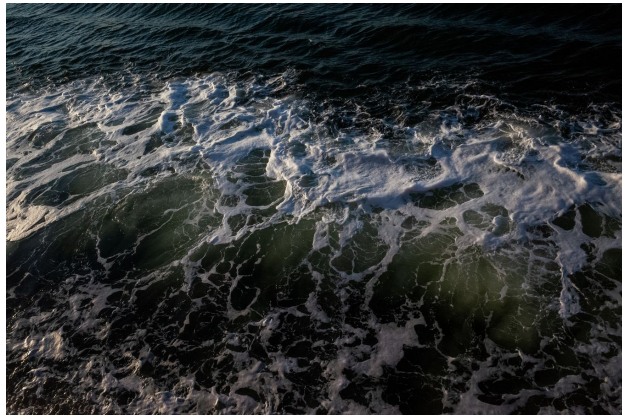
Loneliness and social isolation were linked to an increased risk of death from any cause, according to new research. That includes missing out on seeing loved ones, not having weekly group activities like a book club, or just often feeling lonely.

“Just like we need to make time in our busy lives to be physically active, we need to make time in our busy lives to be socially active,” said Julianne Holt-Lunstad, director of the Social Connection & Health Lab at Brigham Young University, who wasn’t involved in the report.

A combination of several loneliness factors could be even more harmful, the data suggested. For example, having few family and friend visits was riskier when the person also lived alone.

The study, published Thursday in the medical journal BMC Medicine, tracked people for more than a decade and collected loneliness data before the Covid-19 pandemic. It adds to increasing evidence that loneliness can be bad for our health, contributing to health problems including anxiety, heart disease and dementia.

“It is hard to think of a health condition that is not impacted by loneliness,” said Dr. Carla Perissinotto, a geriatrician and palliative care physician at the University of California, San Francisco, who wasn’t involved in the most recent study.



Chronic feelings of loneliness can hurt a person's sleep and are linked to bodily inflammation, which can contribute to a range of diseases.

Americans are now spending more time alone and less time socializing in-person, compared with two decades ago, a trend that started taking hold even before the Covid-19 pandemic. A 2023 Gallup poll found that 17% of U.S. adults—and nearly a quarter of adults under the age of 30—reported feeling a significant amount of loneliness the day before they took the survey.

Health officials are taking notice. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy put out an advisory report on loneliness and social isolation in May, citing research that suggests that lacking social connection could be as dangerous as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.

In the new paper, researchers at the University of Glasgow analyzed data from more than 450,000 participants in the U.K. Biobank database. The participants, ages 38 to 73, answered questions about their social connectedness. After around 12½ years, some 33,000 had died, including more than 5,000 from cardiovascular disease.

The researchers looked at five measures for loneliness and isolation: often feeling lonely, not being able to confide in a close companion, living alone, how often people visit with friends and family, and weekly group activities. All of them had an impact.

“When we’re asking people how socially connected or isolated they are, we need to ask more than one question,” said Jason Gill, one of the paper’s authors and a professor of cardiometabolic health at the University of Glasgow.

The strongest link was for people who were never visited by family and friends, which was associated with a 39% increase in risk of death during the study period compared with those with daily visits. Those who had at least monthly friend and family visits had a lower risk of dying, the researchers said, but seeing them more often didn’t appear to add an additional benefit.



Researchers looked at measures for loneliness and isolation, including how often people visit with loved ones and weekly group activities.

“There is potentially a protective effect around monthly friends and family visits,” said Dr. Hamish Foster, the study’s lead author and a clinical research fellow at the University of Glasgow.

Some benefits of social connection are practical, such as having someone to pick up medications or take you to and from doctor’s appointments. But the consequences of loneliness cut deeper. Chronic feelings of loneliness can also hurt a person’s sleep and are linked to bodily inflammation, which can contribute to a range of diseases.

“This uncomfortable, distressful feeling of being lonely over time has a negative effect,” said Antonio Terracciano, a professor in geriatrics at Florida State University College of Medicine, who wasn’t involved with the study. “You are in a state of stress, and over time this can increase vulnerability to disease.”

In a separate study, Terracciano and his colleagues analyzed data from some 490,000 U.K. Biobank participants and found that loneliness was connected to an increased risk of developing Parkinson’s disease. The results were published in the journal *JAMA Neurology* in October. Their earlier work also connected loneliness to a heightened risk of dementia.

Other research has implicated loneliness in increased risk for higher blood pressure, stroke and depression. One study even found that adults living alone might be at an increased risk of dying from cancer, while another suggested that loneliness could increase the risk of death for cancer survivors.

People can have different preferences for how they want to socialize, researchers said. And the number of social connections someone has isn't always an end goal in itself; the quality of those relationships matters.

“Is it someone that is going to be there even if nothing is needed, will sit with you, and you can be comfortable because you have complete trust in them?” said Louise Hawkley, a health and loneliness researcher at NORC at the University of Chicago who wasn't involved in the study. “That is a perception that makes such a difference.”



People who had at least monthly friend and family visits had a lower risk of dying, researchers found, but seeing them more often didn't appear to add an additional benefit.

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