

# Social Isolation

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## Are You at Risk?

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In 2017, Statistics Canada reported that 1 in 5 older adults are lonely, felt they lack company, felt abandoned or isolated.

### Risk factors for social isolation

The risk factors for social isolation are many and varied. They include:

- living alone
- being age 80 or older
- having multiple chronic health conditions that may impact your mobility, such as diabetes, dementia, or osteoarthritis
- the size of your 'social network', which includes:
  - children
  - siblings
  - other relatives
  - close friends
  - neighbours
- frequency of contact with the members of your social network
- lacking access to transportation
- living with low income
- challenges in using technology
- changes in family structures, such as younger people moving for work and leaving older adults behind
- where you live
- critical life changes, such as retirement, death of a spouse or losing a driver's licence
- age-related disorders such as hearing loss, loss of speech, fear of falling, and incontinence.

### Groups at increased risk

There are also specific groups of older adults who are at greater risk of social isolation, including:

- caregivers
- Indigenous peoples
- newcomers to Canada and
- lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people.

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### What can you do to decrease social isolation?

- **Mobility:** manage chronic conditions and promote brain health to optimize your function and mobility.
- **Physical activity:** engage in light- to moderate-intensity group physical activities like walking groups. See Canada's 24-Hour Movement Guidelines. Pick something you like and stick with it.
- **Social activity:** consider group activities, either an old hobby or try something new.
- **Technology:** using technologies like smartphones, tablets, webcams, or social media platforms can increase the amount and frequency of contact and reduce social isolation; particularly between different generations.
- **Transportation:** consider driver training programs if you want to continue driving; if not, look for alternate transportation solutions like public transit, taxis, or specialized services for those who might be disabled.
- **Volunteering:** this can help to build a support network that's close by and contributes to feelings of connectedness and contributing to your community.
- **Addressing health conditions:** age-related conditions such as hearing loss or loss of speech, fear of falling, and incontinence can all impact a person's ability to participate in social activities.
  - Getting a hearing test in mid and late life is a proactive first step; if a deficit is found, several technologies and useful strategies can be used to improve a person's hearing.
  - Aphasia – language difficulties that may arise because of a stroke – can benefit from speech-language therapy.
  - Exercise programs and balance classes may help prevent a fall; cognitive behavioural therapy can help reduce the fear of falling.
  - You can reduce incontinence symptoms through a number of strategies, like going to the bathroom on a regular schedule and being mindful of the timing of when you ingest liquids; reducing caffeine and alcohol intake; practicing pelvic floor muscle exercises (often called Kegel exercises); and losing weight.

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### The final word

- At every stage of our lives, it's important to actively expand our social networks.
- If you are not feeling confident about starting something new, bring a friend for support. It will benefit you both.
- Regardless of your age, look for activities that can span your life and create lasting connections.
- Be open to transportation solutions if driving a car is no longer an option.
- If a person expresses loneliness even though it appears there are opportunities for social activities, they may benefit from seeking support for their mental health and should start by paying a visit with their healthcare team.
- If you don't know where to start, contact your local YMCA, library, peer support groups, or call 211 or use 211.ca to find out about programs and services in your community.