Social Isolation

Are You at Risk?

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.