

U.S.

Risks of Loneliness Among Seniors Aren't Being Adequately Addressed, Report Warns

Research shows social isolation is associated with increased chances for early death, advisory group says



A new report encourages doctors and other health-care providers to periodically assess patients for signs of loneliness and social isolation.

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By Janet Adamy

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WASHINGTON—The U.S. health system is falling short in addressing the serious public health threat of loneliness and social isolation among America's seniors, according to a new report by an influential advisory group.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine said Thursday that nearly one-quarter of Americans aged 65 and older who live in community settings have few relationships or infrequent social contact. It concluded that four decades of research have produced robust evidence that social isolation is associated with a significantly increased risk for early death from all causes.

"This is a major problem in our country that tends to go unrecognized," said Dan Blazer, chairman of the committee that produced the report and a professor emeritus of psychiatry at Duke University. In treating these conditions, "there just is no evidence base in terms of what works and what does not," he added.

The report calls for the Department of Health and Human Services to start a national resource center to treat the phenomenon, and for more research into what treatments work. It also encourages doctors and other health-care providers to periodically assess patients for signs of loneliness and social isolation, particularly after the death of a spouse or a move, and include their findings in patients' electronic health records.

The report also suggested that existing Medicaid and private insurance programs that target so-called social determinants of health be reworked to address loneliness and social isolation.

The authors cautioned about relying on newer technologies, such as social media and robots, to address the problem because they may in fact exacerbate it. "The fear we had on the committee is that we're seeing a rapid advance in things like robotic animals that would substitute a real animal," Dr. Blazer said. "We don't know what that does to the rest of the social environment."

Another concern is that many existing programs to combat loneliness and isolation rely on volunteers, grants and donations. "This is an unsustainable financing model," the report said.

Two years ago, the U.K. appointed a minister for loneliness, a move that caught the attention of the report's authors. Dr. Blazer said they didn't recommend creating that position in the U.S. because "I'm not sure that type of thing works very well in the United States."

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