

**ISSUE BRIEF**

**THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL  
SUPPORT FOR THE HEALTH AND  
WELL-BEING OF OLDER ADULTS**

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## Executive summary

Social determinants of health—the characteristics of the environments in which people are born, live, work, play, and worship—affect the health and well-being of people of all ages. For older adults, social determinants of health can influence both physical and emotional outcomes because these factors impact a wide array of issues ranging from health literacy to health insurance.

Social and community context is one type, and it includes factors such as community connection, civic engagement, and discrimination. For older adults, social engagement through volunteering, membership in clubs, and affiliation with religious communities has well-recognized benefits.

By contrast, social isolation and loneliness are also features of a person's social and community context, and these challenges are prevalent and harmful for older adults. Extensive research demonstrates that among older adults, isolation and loneliness elevate the risk of numerous health conditions, hospitalization, and even affect mortality rates. However, social support from family, friends, and neighbors, as well as ongoing social engagement can counteract these risks.

Older adults who feel lonely or isolated can improve their social engagement by nurturing existing social networks, joining a group or club, volunteering in the community, and learning how to use social media and other technologies that facilitate communication. In addition, older adults can also look to healthcare providers, local religious groups, county-level departments of aging, and the local area agency on aging for help and information about optimizing social engagement and social support.



## Social determinants of health and social support

Factors such as income, walkable neighborhoods, and educational attainment are examples of social determinants of health<sup>1</sup>, and these factors are frequently grouped into five categories:

- Economic stability
- Education access and quality
- Healthcare access and quality
- Neighborhood and the built environment
- Social and community context

Social determinants of health can impact older adults' health in many ways.<sup>2,3,4,5</sup>

This issue brief focuses on the impact of social support—a key aspect of social and community context—on health behaviors, risk factors, and outcomes in older adults.

### The importance of social and community context

Social and community context refers to the circumstances in which people live, learn, work, and play, and can impact health and well-being. Examples of these characteristics include cohesion with communities, civic engagement, discrimination, and incarceration.<sup>1,6</sup> Each of these aspects of social and community context have been shown to influence health, including the health of older adults. For example, volunteering and civic engagement have well-recognized benefits for older adults, even among seniors with physical and cognitive limitations.<sup>7,8,9</sup> By contrast, discrimination and incarceration have very unfavorable health effects on older adults and people of all ages.<sup>10,11,12,13</sup>

**Social isolation:** The objective lack of or limited social contact with others.

**Loneliness:** The perception of social isolation or the subjective feeling of being lonely.

### The prevalence of social isolation among older adults

Social isolation and loneliness are features of a person's social and community context, and these challenges are especially prevalent among older adults. According to a report from the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 24 percent of community-dwelling adults aged 65 and older were socially isolated, and four percent were severely socially isolated. The report also revealed that 43 percent of adults 60 and over reported feeling lonely, and of these, 13 percent reported feeling this way often, findings that echo other research demonstrating the severity of social isolation for the aging population.<sup>14,15,16</sup>

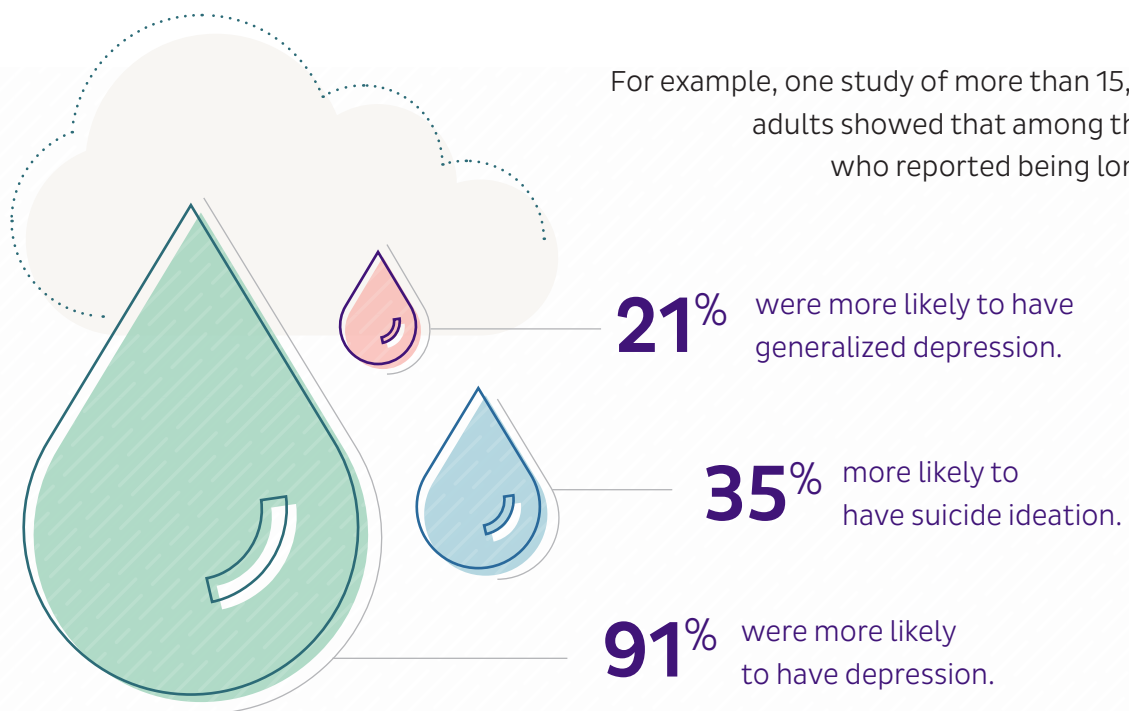


## The impact of social isolation on the health and well-being of older adults

Research demonstrates that strong social relationships have a favorable impact on key health indicators. For example, a meta-analysis of 148 studies on the relationship between social relationships and mortality showed a 50 percent increased likelihood of survival among participants with strong social relationships.<sup>17</sup>

**Meta-analysis:** an examination of data from a number of independent studies of the same subject, in order to determine overall trends.

Conversely, there is also extensive research demonstrating that social isolation and loneliness are associated with elevated risk of developing numerous health conditions, hospitalization, and excess mortality.



A meta-analysis of 19 studies on the association between social relationships and dementia risk showed that less frequent social contact increased the risk of dementia and loneliness by nearly 60 percent.<sup>18, 19</sup>

Loneliness also impacts physical health, with one study showing that the risk of functional decline among lonely, older adults increase by 59 percent.<sup>16</sup> Loneliness contributes to less favorable outcomes among older adults with established health conditions, including common chronic conditions like cardiovascular disease. Social isolation and loneliness are associated with a 29 percent increased risk of developing heart disease and a 32 percent increased risk of stroke.<sup>20</sup> It follows that among people with heart disease, loneliness also contributes to increased healthcare utilization, with one study showing that heart failure patients with a high degree of social isolation had a 68 percent increased risk of hospitalization.<sup>21</sup> The same study reported that these patients were at nearly four times the risk of death as those who did not experience social isolation.<sup>21</sup>

## How social support helps older adults

Social support is the actual or perceived availability of resources from others, typically one's social network—family, friends, neighbors, and others.<sup>14</sup> Social support includes intangible resources, such as emotional support from a trusted friend or confidant. It also includes instrumental support, like financial assistance and informational support, such as useful advice or feedback.<sup>22</sup> Given the established relationship between loneliness and unfavorable health outcomes, it is notable that many studies have shown that social support relieves older adults' loneliness and feelings of isolation, thereby improving both psychological and physical well-being.<sup>23,24,25,26</sup>

## Addressing social isolation and enhancing social support

There are many ways that older adults who feel lonely or isolated can work to improve their level of social engagement. Some strategies include:

**Nurturing existing social networks:** Maintaining personal relationships with family, friends, and neighbors through calls, visits, walking, or other activities helps to prevent isolation and loneliness.

**Joining a group or club:** Becoming part of a book group, garden club, or other group-based hobby helps older adults meet new people, form new ties, and build social support.

**Volunteering in the community:** Many older adults benefit from volunteering their time, skills, and knowledge to an array of community-based organizations.

**Offering family assistance:** Some older adults can form stronger bonds with family members through babysitting or providing caregiving support.

**Going back to work:** Retirement can be a stressful event for many older adults because it removes both regular contact with colleagues and a sense of routine. Some older adults respond to these challenges by finding part-time work or nurturing a second career.

**Learning how to use social media and other technology:** Computers have greatly facilitated the ability of older adults to have video calls with children and grandchildren, and social media allows seniors to remain actively involved in the lives of their friends and family through engagement on these platforms.

## Where to go for help

There are many resources that can help older adults enhance their social support networks.

### Healthcare providers

Older adults should discuss their mental health concerns, including social isolation, with their healthcare team and ask for suggestions on how to address the problem.

### Local religious groups and organizations

Seniors who are interested in building social support in a religious context can contact their local church, synagogue, or mosque to identify groups for retired congregants or other gatherings that are relevant for older adults.

### County-level departments of aging

Many counties have offices that support an array of recreational, social, and volunteer programs for older adults.

### Area Agencies on Aging

These agencies are designated by states to address the needs of older adults at the regional or local level, including ideas and resources to prevent loneliness and isolation.

### Advocacy organizations

The [National Council on Aging](#), [AARP](#), and other organizations that advocate for the well-being of older adults have resources to help address social isolation.



## Conclusion

Social determinants of health encompass a wide array of factors that impact older adults' health and well-being. The effects can be negative—such as social isolation increasing the risk of developing health conditions and hospitalization. But they can also be positive—such as the favorable impact of social engagement on psychological and physical function in older adults. There are many strategies that can enhance social engagement, including joining clubs or other community-based groups, and there are also local resources that can provide information and guidance on what opportunities are available.

As the U.S. population continues to age, it will be increasingly important to ensure that older adults have the knowledge of, and capacity to access opportunities for social engagement, and that these opportunities continue to be supported at the local, state, and federal levels.



The PAN Foundation is an independent, national 501 (c)(3) organization dedicated to helping underinsured people with life-threatening, chronic, and rare diseases get the medications and treatments they need by assisting with their out-of-pocket costs and advocating for improved access and affordability.

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## Supporting Literature

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