

Health Reports: Social isolation and mortality among Canadian seniors

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The impact of social isolation and loneliness on health and well-being is recognized globally as a public health issue. Currently, many Canadians are experiencing social isolation as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic—seniors in particular are advised to physically isolate themselves to reduce the risk of infection.

According to a study based on responses to the 2008/2009 Canadian Community Health Survey – Healthy Aging, an estimated 525,000 people (12%) aged 65 and older felt socially isolated. This was measured as a combination of feelings of loneliness and a weak sense of community belonging. Over 1 million respondents (1,018,000, or 24%) reported low participation, meaning they participated in community activities less than once a week.

Although estimates of low participation among men and women aged 65 and older did not differ significantly, women (15%) were more likely than men (10%) to report feelings of social isolation.

Men and women who were low participators in 2008/2009 faced a higher risk of death over the nine-year follow-up period than individuals who had participated in community activities more frequently. Seniors who felt socially isolated were more likely to report ill health, which in turn increased their risk of death over the following nine years. These associations remained when sociodemographic characteristics and other factors were taken into account.

The mechanisms through which social isolation impacts a person's health and mortality are likely numerous and varied. For example, low participation could reflect deficits in social networks, mobility problems, lack of transportation, geographic isolation or other factors—such as hearing or vision loss—that can be obstacles to social participation. Feelings of isolation could be the result of a loss or change in relationships caused by death or separation, physical and mental health problems, ageism, and other factors that leave people feeling lonely and isolated from the community.

While this study examines the associations between social isolation and mortality over a nine-year period prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it also highlights the importance of seniors returning to their activities and social interactions after the pandemic to avoid long-term social isolation.

Note to readers

Data from the Canadian Community Health Survey – Healthy Aging (2008/2009) and the Canadian Vital Statistics Death Database up to December 31, 2017, were used for this analysis.

The Canadian Community Health Survey – Healthy Aging does not include residents of long-term care facilities.



The article "[Social isolation and mortality among Canadian seniors](#)" is now available in the June 17, 2020, online issue of *Health Reports*, Vol. 31, no. 3 (Catalogue number [82-003-X](#)).

This issue of *Health Reports* also contains the articles "[Disease assimilation: The mortality impacts of fine particulate matter on immigrants to Canada](#)" and "[Accuracy of matching residential postal codes to census geography](#)."

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