

# Talking to your patients about loneliness and social isolation

Feelings of loneliness can happen to anyone, anywhere. But as people age, experience hardships or have health challenges, these feelings may occur more often.

Patients don't always know where to go for support, and they don't understand the serious impact loneliness can have on their health. That's where you and your care team can help.

## Loneliness vs. social isolation

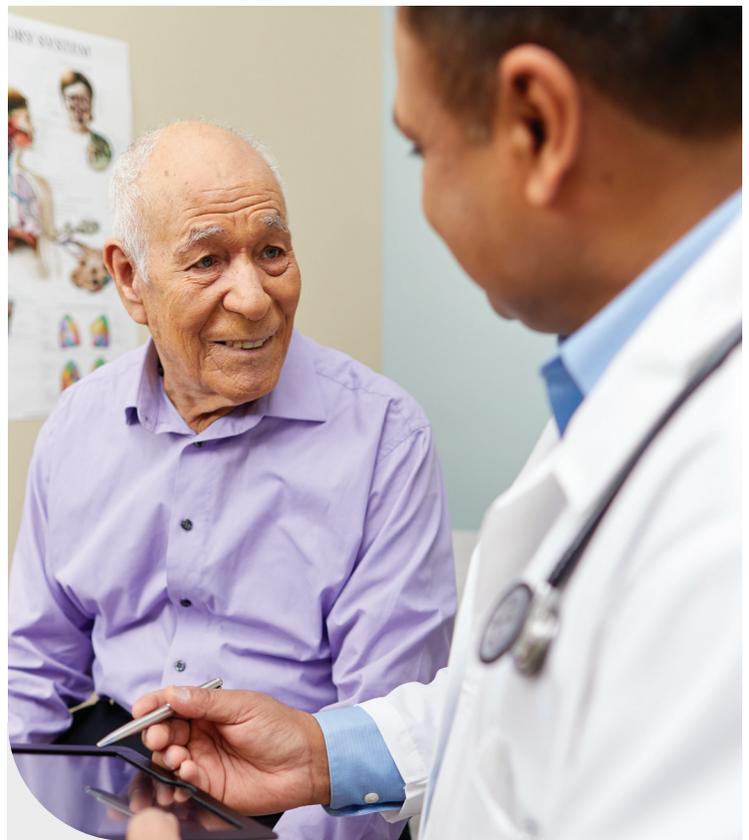
- **Loneliness** is the perception of the quality of a person's social network, including feelings of sadness, distress or disconnection from others.
- **Social isolation** refers to the actual size of an individual's social network and the person's physical separation from support networks.

## Feeling more connected matters in patient health

In America, **one in five people** always or often feel lonely or socially isolated.<sup>1</sup> For adults aged 45 and older, **about one-third feel lonely**, which can have significant implications for their health,<sup>2</sup> including:

- Social isolation significantly increases a person's risk of premature death.
- Poor social relationships (characterized by social isolation or loneliness) are associated with a **29%** increased risk of heart disease and a **32%** increased risk of stroke.
- Loneliness is associated with higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide.
- Social isolation is associated with about a **50%** increased risk of dementia.

Loneliness can also lead to long-term "fight-or-flight" stress signaling, which negatively affects immune system functioning and creates more inflammation.<sup>3</sup>



## Screening your patients for loneliness

During annual wellness exams or regular appointments with patients, screen them for loneliness using the UCLA 3-Question Loneliness Scale, which measures relational connectedness, social connectedness and self-perceived isolation:

### How often do you feel you lack companionship?

1. a. Hardly ever  
b. Some of the time  
c. Often

### How often do you feel left out?

2. a. Hardly ever  
b. Some of the time  
c. Often

### How often do you feel isolated from others?

3. a. Hardly ever  
b. Some of the time  
c. Often

**Calculation:** A response of "some of the time" or "often" to any of the questions should trigger a referral for loneliness support.

## When patients screen positive for loneliness, you can help

Loneliness and social isolation can be triggered by health challenges like hearing or memory loss, isolation after surgery, addiction and mental health problems. Depending on the situation, appropriate resources and referrals will vary. Understanding the root cause of your patients' loneliness can help you create an individualized care plan and set of support resources.

### You can refer your patients to the following resources:

- **Patients' medical insurance**

Some health plan benefits may include mental or behavioral health support. The patient should call the number on the back of their medical insurance ID card to see what benefits or community resources may be available.

- **Anxiety and Depression Association of America (ADAA)**

The ADAA is a nonprofit organization that provides patients with useful articles, local services or an online support group to help with anxiety and depression struggles.

[www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)

- **Eldercare Area Agencies on Aging**

The Eldercare Locator helps older patients and their caregivers find trustworthy, local support resources for various social health concerns, including loneliness and social isolation.

**800-677-1116 (TTY: 711),**

Monday – Friday, 9 a.m. – 8 p.m., Eastern time

[www.eldercare.acl.gov](http://www.eldercare.acl.gov)

- **Far From Alone**

Find loneliness resources as well as help with financial assistance, food, medical care and more. [farfromalone.com](http://farfromalone.com)

- **Institute on Aging's Friendship line**

This toll-free number is the only accredited crisis line in the country for people 60 and older, as well as adults living with disabilities. It offers a friendly conversation and the caring ear of a trained volunteer at no cost.

**800-971-0016 (TTY: 711),**

24 hours a day, 7 days a week

- **Mental Health America**

This community-based nonprofit organization provides local and online support groups, community events, volunteer opportunities and more.

[www.mhanational.org](http://www.mhanational.org)



To learn more about Humana's efforts to address loneliness, social isolation and other social determinants of health, visit [PopulationHealth.Humana.com](https://www.humana.com/populationhealth) or connect at [BoldGoal@humana.com](mailto:BoldGoal@humana.com).

### References

1. Kaiser Family Foundation, "Loneliness and Social Isolation in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Japan: An International Survey," 2018, <https://www.kff.org/report-section/loneliness-and-social-isolation-in-theunited-states-the-united-kingdom-and-japan-an-international-survey-introduction/>.
2. CDC, "Loneliness and Social Isolation Linked to Serious Health Conditions," 2021, <https://www.cdc.gov/aging/publications/features/lonely-older-adults.html>.
3. American Psychological Association, "Social isolation: It could kill you," 2019, <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2019/05/ce-corner-isolation>.