

# What is social isolation?

Someone who is socially isolated does not have many social contacts and interactions with friends, family and others.<sup>1</sup> Many older adults report feeling socially excluded and a recent report indicated that 20% of Canadian seniors, pre-COVID-19 pandemic, did not have a single person to reach out to in case of emergency.<sup>2</sup>

## Risk factors for social isolation in seniors<sup>3</sup>

Social isolation may result from a major event or a combination of small events, making it difficult for seniors to cope.<sup>1</sup> Factors include:



**Health and disability:** Having physical/mental health issues; multiple chronic health problems; age-related conditions; mental illnesses.



**Knowledge and awareness:** technology challenges; lack of information about available services; lack of awareness or access to community services or programs.



**Life transitions:** loss of a spouse; loss of sense of community; disruption of social networks; lack of family and friend supports; loss of driver's license; entry into care; living in a nursing home.



**Social relationships:** low quality of relationships; having no children or contact with family; living alone; not being married or common-lawed; loss of friends and social network.



**Gender identity:** Individual & environmental risk factors are linked to social isolation in LGBTQ+ seniors.



**Ethnicity:** Immigrant and refugee seniors are generally lonelier than older Canadians.<sup>2</sup>

## Signs that someone might be socially isolated<sup>5</sup>

- Deep boredom, general lack of interest and withdrawal.
- Losing interest in personal hygiene.
- Poor eating and nutrition.
- Significant disrepair, clutter and hoarding in the home.

## Mental health consequences

We need academic and community-based research to better understand how older adults' mental health presents, and differ from, that of younger people. Studies show that:

- A major consequence of social isolation is poor mental health.
- Social isolation is linked to increased levels of depression and suicide.<sup>4</sup>
- One quarter of seniors suffer from a mental health problem (i.e., depression, anxiety, dementia).<sup>4</sup>
- For adults 65 and older living in the community, 10-15% live with depression. For seniors living in retirement homes, this number is greater than 44%.<sup>4</sup>
- Over 50% of seniors over 80 identify as feeling lonely.<sup>4</sup>

Seniors experience the highest degree of loneliness and social exclusion of any age group. Canada needs to confront its current epidemic of loneliness head-on. Investments need to be made. CanAge addresses this issue and makes recommendations in its **VOICES of Canada's Seniors: A Roadmap to an Age-Inclusive Canada.**



[www.CanAge.ca/voices](http://www.CanAge.ca/voices)

## References

1. Social isolation of seniors: a focus on new immigrant and refugee seniors of Canada. Employment and Social Development Canada. (2018)
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5. Frank, D. The danger of social isolation. AARP (2018) <https://www.aarp.org/health/conditions-treatments/info-2018/social-isolation-symptoms-danger.html>



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