

Loneliness can cut survival after a cancer diagnosis: Study

June 5 2023, by Denise Mann



There's a "loneliness epidemic" in the United States, and feelings of

isolation have been linked to heart disease, stroke and other health conditions.

Now, new research suggests that [cancer survivors](#) who feel lonely may be more likely to die than survivors who have more [social support](#).

"Loneliness may be linked to worse survival following a [cancer diagnosis](#) through multiple mechanisms, such as the increased risk of experiencing [negative emotions](#) such as hostility, stress and anxiety, increased unhealthy behaviors including smoking, [alcohol abuse](#) and less [physical activity](#), or through physiological pathways such as immune system disorders," explained study author [Jingxuan Zhao](#). She is a senior associate scientist at the American Cancer Society.

"It is also possible that cancer survivors who feel lonelier might not receive the practical and emotional support they need for their symptoms," Zhao added.

For the study, Zhao and her colleagues looked at data on nearly 3,450 cancer survivors aged 50 and older who were part of the 2008-2018 Health and Retirement Study. These folks were followed through the end of 2020.

The researchers assessed loneliness every four years and grouped folks into four categories: low/no loneliness; mild loneliness; moderate loneliness; and high loneliness.

Cancer survivors who reported any loneliness were more like to die during the follow-up period than their counterparts who were not lonely. The more lonely a person was, the greater their risk of dying, the study showed.

These findings held even after investigators controlled for other factors

that could affect the risk of dying, such as age.

It's time to start helping cancer survivors feel more connected, the researchers suggested.

"One approach to reduce their loneliness is to connect with other people who also have had cancer or to join a support group and share their experience," Zhao said. "Cancer survivors can also reach out to social workers, therapists or other health professionals to express their concerns and seek help."

Caregivers, including [family members](#) and friends, should be aware that cancer survivors may experience loneliness, which may affect their health.

"Ask cancer survivors about their feelings or help them navigate programs that can screen for loneliness and provide social support to those in need," she advised.

It can be hard to tell who is lonely. "People who live alone or have fewer social connections might be at higher risks of experiencing loneliness," Zhao said.

The findings were presented Saturday at the American Society of Clinical Oncology (ASCO) annual meeting, in Chicago. Findings presented at medical conferences should be considered preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed journal.

"Loneliness is increasingly recognized as a risk factor for worse outcomes in cancer survivors," said [Dr. Arif Kamal](#), chief patient officer for the American Cancer Society. "Research like this highlights the important opportunity role of oncology teams and [primary care providers](#) in assessing for loneliness and creating community-based

interventions to ensure that no one experiences or survives cancer alone."

More information: [Learn more about the health effects of loneliness](#) in the U.S. Surgeon General's recent report on the loneliness epidemic.

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