

Isolation, loneliness of lockdowns is tough on America's seniors

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(HealthDay)—Seniors are among those most at risk for dying from

COVID-19, and so they've been urged to socially distance during the pandemic.

But experts fear this isolation, while protecting them from a potentially [fatal infection](#), might be wearing away at their health in other ways.

"By [older adults](#) being less socially engaged and less active, they are absolutely seeing changes in physical function and in cognitive sharpness," Dr. Carla Perissinotto, associate chief of geriatrics clinical programs at the University of California, San Francisco, said during an [HD Live interview](#).

Social isolation has been associated with a 50% increased risk of developing dementia, according to a report released earlier this year from the National Academy of Sciences (NAS).

Isolation is hard on the body as well, the report says. Loneliness has been associated with a 59% increased risk of functional decline and a 45% increased risk of death.

Poor social relationships specifically appear to increase a person's risk of heart disease and stroke, the report found. For example, loneliness among heart failure patients nearly quadruples their risk of death, and it increases their risk of hospitalization by 68%.

Even prior to the pandemic, [social isolation](#) was a major concern among aging Americans. About 1 in 4 people aged 65 and older were considered to be socially isolated, the NAS report said, and 43% of those 60 and older reported feeling lonely.

Now, people in [long-term care facilities](#) have gone months without being able to see their loved ones due to COVID lockdowns, and even seniors still living independently are going long stretches without seeing friends

and loved ones.

"We are in this crisis time where we're having to physically distance, and it is literally putting these problems right in front of us and making us not put them on the back burner anymore, as we used to," Perissinotto said.

Perissinotto and other gerontologists are concerned that the social distancing measures used to protect older folks from COVID-19 are damaging their mental and physical health, and that these effects may be long-lasting.

"The longer we go on ignoring the importance of social connection, the worse the outcomes are and the harder it's going to be to come back to a period of normalcy," Perissinotto said.

Despite these concerns, Perissinotto warned against assuming that your older friend or relative is unhappy just because they're isolated.

"You can't assume that because someone is alone, that they are lonely. And the reverse is true—because they're with other people, that they're not lonely," Perissinotto said.

Instead, keep an eye out for telltale signs of decline.

"If they're showing more signs of withdrawal and even worsened confusion, this may be a sign that there needs to be increased socialization and stimulation," Perissinotto said. "Is someone more disheveled? Are they losing weight?"

Folks also might be anxious or depressed from the pandemic, or could be suffering medical problems like [high blood pressure](#) because they're having difficulty filling their usual prescriptions, she added.

People worried about older friends or relatives should ask them to see their doctor, who can use validated tools to assess whether they are truly suffering from loneliness or isolation, Perissinotto said.

Technology like Zoom or FaceTime can help ease loneliness for some, but not all.

"It's not going to work for some people who have [severe cognitive impairment](#) or hearing impairment or visual impairment," Perissinotto said. "For others it might accentuate more of the loss of not being able to see people in person."

There are creative ways to reach out to seniors you love, to let them know they're not alone.

"I was pleasantly surprised by receiving a letter in the mail from someone I hadn't seen in a long time," Perissinotto said. "That was a new way of connecting that was old-school, but I felt just as connected to that person had I seen them in person."

Neighborhood dwellers also might want to check in on the elderly person down the street, to make sure they're in good shape.

"Look around you. You may have neighbors you have assumed were OK. There's nothing wrong with a ring on the doorbell to say, 'Hey, do you need anything?'" Perissinotto said.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more about [social isolation in seniors](#).

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