

# Social isolation puts elderly at health risk

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One in five elderly adults is socially isolated from family or friends, increasing their risks for poor mental and physical health, as well as higher rates of mortality, according to a University of Michigan study.

U-M researchers investigated several factors impacting social isolation from family and friends within a national sample of more than 1,300 older African-Americans, black Caribbeans and whites. Study participants were aged 55 and older during the data collection from 2001 to 2003.

Overall, most elderly were connected to both family and friends (77 percent), while 11 percent were isolated from friends only and 7 percent were isolated from family members only. Of concern, however, were the 5 percent of elderly who were socially isolated from both family and friends, which may place them at risk for physical and [mental health problems](#), the researchers say.

Men were more likely than women to be socially isolated. Women's lifelong investments in family and [friend](#) networks, often through their social roles as caregivers to others, suggest that they may be less likely to experience social isolation in [older age](#). African-American, black Caribbean and white [older adults](#) reported similar levels of social isolation from family and friends.

Another key finding suggested that older adults who live with family members may still report social isolation from friends, suggesting that these [family members](#) and friends have distinctive and complementary roles in terms of social isolation.

"In essence, our findings indicated that living arrangements themselves—alone or with others—were not indicative of social contact or engagement," said lead author Linda Chatters, the Paula Allen-Meares Collegiate Professor of Social Work and professor of public health.

Older adults with mobility impairments such as moving about in one's home, standing for 30 minutes or walking a long distance, were more likely to report being isolated from friends. In contrast, elderly who

experienced impairments in self-care such as bathing and dressing were less likely to indicate being isolated from friends.

One explanation for these findings could be that mobility impairments lead to [social isolation](#) because they limit the ability to socialize with friends outside the home, the researchers say. In contrast, because self-care impairments reflect a higher level of physical frailty, friends may be more likely to make home visits to the elderly.

**More information:** Linda Chatters et al. Correlates of Objective Social Isolation from Family and Friends among Older Adults, *Healthcare* (2018). [DOI: 10.3390/healthcare6010024](https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare6010024)

Provided by University of Michigan

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