

## Loneliness lethal for seniors, UCSF study says

Erin Allday

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Feeling lonely always hurts, but when it comes to the elderly, it may actually contribute to failing health or an early death, UCSF researchers say.

In a study of 1,600 seniors, the results of which were published Tuesday in the Archives of Internal Medicine, doctors found that people who reported being lonely were more likely to suffer a decline in health or die over a six-year period than those who were content with their social lives.

Loneliness didn't necessarily mean being alone - almost two-thirds of seniors who reported feeling lonely were married or living with a partner. Researchers defined loneliness as feeling left out or isolated or lacking companionship.

"I'm hoping this paper allows people to look critically at themselves and how they treat elders around them," said study author Dr. Carla Perissinotto, an assistant professor of geriatrics at UCSF. "This country is not great at caring for its elderly. But certainly that is one of the messages, to look out for the people around you, because sooner or later that's going to be you."

The relationship between loneliness and poor health wasn't necessarily shocking, said the study authors and other geriatric experts. Anecdotally, doctors who deal with the elderly said they've seen time and again older patients in declining health who are clearly lonely. But the UCSF study is among the largest to tease out feelings of loneliness, which is separate from general depression, and strongly connect them to ill health.

The study looked at interviews done in 2002 with 1,604 seniors over age 60 who were asked to describe how often they felt lonely. Researchers then looked at reports of deaths and physical function in that group over the next six years.

About 43 percent of the adults reported feeling lonely at least some of the time. Of those seniors, 23 percent died over the six-year study, compared to 14 percent of the participants who weren't lonely - a 45 percent increase. The lonely seniors had a 59 percent greater risk of suffering a decline in function, which was defined as being less mobile or less able to take care of daily activities like bathing.

### Biology and behavior

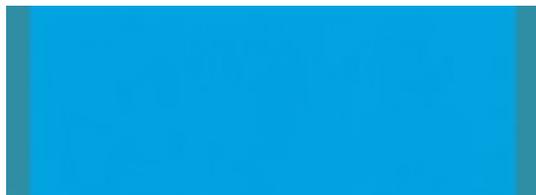
There are likely many reasons for the relationship between loneliness and ill health, doctors said. It could

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be biological - previous studies have shown that loneliness is similar to stress in that it can cause the release of hormones that may impact the immune system.

And it could be behavioral. Doctors said they often hear from patients who are losing weight because they don't have anyone to share a meal with, or who are bad at sticking to a health care regimen because they're lacking a friend or partner to simply remind them to take medications.

"I have a patient who's losing weight, and point blank, she says to me, 'I'm losing weight because eating is a social experience for me and now I'm eating alone and it's not enjoyable,' " Perissinotto said. "That's a huge part of why she's declining."

Dr. Marci Teresi, medical director of the memory clinic at Kaiser Santa Clara, said for many of her patients, it's clear that their doctor visits are "the big social activity for the day or the month."

Loneliness, she believes, can leave people vulnerable to pain and other discomforts that an active social life could distract them from.

"They start focusing on things that they can't do, and they focus on pain. That just perpetuates their decline," she said. "I've had people tell me they feel like they're sort of done with life."

Stanford geriatrist Dr. VJ Periyakoil said her patients often describe feeling "out of sync" and disconnected from society - even if they're married or living with family.

Couples who have been married for years may find themselves strangers as they get older and don't have the shared interests of raising kids, she said. Grandparents may feel unable to connect with both their children and their grandchildren because of generational or lifestyle differences.

"The biggest thing I hear from my adult patients is, 'I don't want to bother anyone,' " Periyakoil said. She recalled one patient who declined radiation therapy to treat his cancer because he didn't want his daughter to have to take off work to drive him to his appointments.

"We need a societal hardware fix to make older adults feel a valuable part of our society, which they are," Periyakoil said. "It's selfish too. All of us are going to get old. We have to take care of them and be mindful of their needs because someday we'll be on the receiving end."

## **Staying connected**

Oakland resident Barbara Dane, 85, said many older adults need to take more responsibility for their own social lives.

For many decades, Dane made a living as a jazz singer and she has always had a rich and varied social life. She made a decision a year and a half ago, after her husband died, to maintain that lifestyle. For her birthday this year, she celebrated by performing for friends and family, and just last Saturday she went to a party with a small group of older friends, who spent the night singing and eating and laughing.

"For better or worse, we are what we do, and if we aren't able to do much, then we're less and less

relevant to the social fabric," Dane said. "If you want to avoid the feeling of irrelevancy, you need to maintain your friendships, maintain your family ties, stay an active part of other people's lives in whatever way you can.

"I'm part of the world," she said. "I need to be out in it."

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