

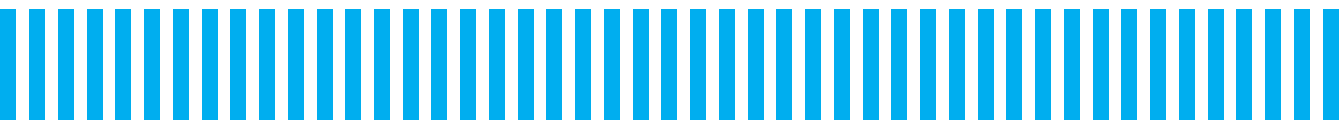
Staying Connected and Healthy During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Resources for Older Adults and Caregivers



Connecting You to Community Services

(800) 677-1116
eldercare.acl.gov





For many of us, engaging in activities that connect us to each other and to our communities can enrich our lives and help us stay healthy. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused Americans of all ages to adjust to lives with fewer in-person social connections than ever before. Unaddressed, this social isolation can lead to loneliness and can impact our physical and mental health. This is particularly true for older adults who are more likely to live alone and whose social circles may be smaller in number or limited by access to technology.

What is Social Isolation?

When we can't see or touch our friends and family members, when our usual community activities are on hold, when we lose a sense of connection to others because we rarely leave our homes, and when we yearn for the purpose those regular interactions gave us, it's easy to feel socially isolated or lonely.



Having few or infrequent social contacts is known as **social isolation**. Those who experience social isolation may also feel **loneliness**, which occurs when the difference between the level of social connections we desire is higher than the social connections we experience.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, 24 percent of older adults were experiencing social isolation and 43 percent reported feelings of loneliness.¹ Researchers predict² that the COVID-19 pandemic will result in older adults feeling the mental and physical health effects of social isolation and loneliness in greater numbers than other age groups, in part because medical guidance advises older adults to embrace physical distancing practices at higher rates.

How Social Isolation and Loneliness Harm Our Mental and Physical Health

Our minds and bodies can respond to the stress of social isolation and loneliness in many ways. Some effects, such as feelings of loneliness and anxiety, are felt immediately. Other effects, such as inflammation, heart disease and cognitive decline, may develop over time (see sidebar).

By increasing our connections to others and to those around us, we can reduce the negative effects social isolation and loneliness can have on our minds and bodies. Whether it is through finding new—or revisiting old—ways of staying connected to others, we can take control of our health and happiness.



There is a measurable relationship between social connections and our health. Individuals experiencing social isolation and loneliness can see their risk of early death increase by as much as 29 percent. Among older adults, the National Academy of Sciences³ reports that social isolation can lead to an **increased likelihood of dementia (50 percent), heart disease (29 percent)⁴ and stroke (32 percent)**, while loneliness can lead to increased rates of higher rates of depression, anxiety and suicide.

Recognizing Social Isolation in Yourself and Others

To help determine whether you or a loved one is experiencing social isolation and feelings of loneliness, experts recommend using an instrument such as the UCLA 3-Item Loneliness Scale.⁵ By answering “hardly ever,” “some of the time” or “often” to these three questions, we can determine the extent to which family members, friends, loved ones and ourselves are experiencing social isolation and loneliness.

- How often do you feel that you lack companionship?
- How often do you feel left out?
- How often do you feel isolated from others?

If you, a family member or a friend answered “some of the time” or “often” to any of these questions, it may be time to seek engagement opportunities in your community.

Fortunately, the **Eldercare Locator**, a public service of the U.S. Administration for Community Living, can connect older adults and caregivers across the country to organizations that offer a variety of activities to help older adults stay engaged and connected to their communities.



Ways to Stay Connected During COVID-19

In response to COVID-19, community-based organizations around the country swiftly developed programs to provide a variety of ways to help older adults stay connected to others in their communities. Whether by moving an exercise class online or creating new activities to build connections, local organizations in your community are likely offering new interactive options for activities that had taken place in person prior to COVID-19.

For things you can do now, **Staying Connected at Home During COVID-19**,⁶ a flyer developed by the Eldercare Locator in partnership with **engAGED: The National Resource Center for Engaging Older Adults** (www.engagingolderadults.org), has some great suggestions. For example, older adults can stay connected by:

- **Reaching out to others.** Make a phone call to a friend or family member to share recipe ideas or to chat about the latest movie or TV show you've watched. Or, send a letter to a loved one to help brighten their day—and yours.
- **Getting physical.** Engaging in physical activity such as a walk or online group exercise classes can boost endorphins and reduce feelings of loneliness.
- **Honing your online skills.** Many use online tools to connect with friends and family. Need help getting started? "Stuck at Home Guide: How to Get Online," a guide by **Senior Planet** (www.seniorplanet.org), contains helpful tips for getting started online, on social media and on Zoom meetings. Visit www.seniorplanet.org/stuck-at-home-guide-get-online.
- **Volunteering to help others.** One way to stay connected to others is by volunteering to share your skills from home. To help you get started, a best-practices guide from the **AARP Foundation** (www.connect2affect.org) contains helpful tips for virtual volunteers. Connect with the Eldercare Locator to find local volunteer opportunities near you.
- **Being creative.** Engaging in art, whether joining a (virtual) singing group, or taking an online drawing or dance class, can offer your brain and body an outlet for expression and engagement.



Finding Resources and Support

Finding local resources in your area is easy! Contacting the **Eldercare Locator** can connect older adults, caregivers, family members, friends and others to an array of services that can help develop new or maintain existing social connections to reduce social isolation and loneliness. The Eldercare Locator can help visitors to its website (eldercare.acl.gov) or those who contact its Call Center at (800) 677-1116, connect to a local agency that can provide much-needed support, right in their own community.



For more ideas on **reducing social isolation**, using **technology** to connect with others virtually, **mental health resources**, information for **people with disabilities, caregivers** and more, visit the Eldercare Locator's website at eldercare.acl.gov.

Whether through friendly check-in calls, Facebook Live Tai Chi sessions, connections to crisis resources, education on using technology to stay connected, home-delivered meals, online fitness classes, or virtual poetry readings and music performances, local **Area Agencies on Aging** and their partners are ready to help find ways you can stay engaged in community life.

For those who may need extra compassion and support during COVID-19, many organizations have developed call lines that provide a friendly voice who can offer emotional support. Contact the Eldercare Locator to learn whether one is available in your community. If not, try contacting the **Institute on Aging's Friendship Line** at (800) 971-0016 or the **AARP Friendly Voice call line**, (888) 281-0145 (English) or (888) 497-4108 (Spanish), to speak with trained volunteers who can lend a friendly ear to those in need of social connections.

If social isolation and loneliness are making a mental health or substance abuse issue worse, the **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration** operates a national helpline. Call (800) 662-HELP (4357) to connect with a trained counselor. If you or someone you know is experiencing suicidal thoughts, get help immediately by contacting the **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** at (800) 273-TALK (8255) or www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org.

Endnotes

¹ <https://www.nap.edu/read/25663/chapter/3#19>

² [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(20\)30061-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(20)30061-X/fulltext)

³ https://download.nap.edu/cart/download.cgi?record_id=25663

⁴ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2394670/>

⁵ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1745691614568352?journalCode=ppsa>

⁶ https://eldercare.acl.gov/Public/Resources/covid_19.aspx



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Eldercare Locator

(800) 677-1116 (Monday–Friday, 9:00 am – 6:00 pm ET)
eldercare.acl.gov

Launched in 1991, the Eldercare Locator is the only national information and referral resource to provide support to consumers across the spectrum of issues affecting older Americans. The Locator was established and is funded by the U.S. Administration for Community Living and is administered by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a).



advocacy | action | answers on aging

National Association of Area Agencies on Aging (n4a)
n4a.org

The mission of n4a is to build the capacity of Area Agencies on Aging and Title VI Native American aging programs so they can better help older adults and people with disabilities live with dignity and choices in their homes and communities.

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The Center for Healthy Aging and the Sam and Rose Stein Institute for Research on Aging at the University of California, Health Sciences, is dedicated to the development and application of the latest advances in biomedical and behavioral science knowledge to issues of successful, healthy aging and the prevention and reduction of the burden of disability and disease in late life.

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