Older Adults Feel Lonelier Due to COVID-19

Individuals report that their health and well-being is worse because of the social distancing required during the pandemic.

November 16, 2020 By Alicia Green

A survey of older adults in Scotland found that social distancing to prevent the spread of the coronavirus has increased their feelings of loneliness. As a result, individuals' smaller social networks and a perception of less social support in frequency, quality and amount has affected their overall physical and mental health, reports the University of Stirling in the United Kingdom.

Most of the survey's 1,429 participants were age 60 and over with an average social network of five people. On average, participants socialized for five days each week for more than 6.6 hours per week. More than half of older adults (56%) blamed social distancing regulations for their increased sense of loneliness. This loneliness score was significantly higher than normal.

Feeling more alone was significantly associated with seniors' smaller social network, lower perceived social support and a decrease in social support frequency, quality and amount as well as a decline in their health and well-being.

"This underlines the importance of addressing loneliness and social contact in older adults, but particularly during pandemics or situations where the risk of isolation is high," said Anna Whittaker, PhD, a professor of behavioral medicine at the University of Stirling.

The data also showed that most participants said they continued meeting physical activity guidelines during lockdown: 35% were moderately active and 41% highly active. Of those who remained active, many included walking in their physical activity total. Over a quarter walked more than they did before pandemic restrictions were instituted.

In contrast, about 40% of older adults reported walking less than before the lockdown, and almost as many participated in reduced amounts of moderate physical activity. Those who engaged in less physical activity experienced poorer well-being.

Researchers noted that individuals who didn't report any changes in their levels of moderate physical activity were the most active prior to lockdown. Walkers who hadn't changed their activity

regimen also registered high levels of total physical activity pre-lockdown.

These findings highlight the positive link between physical activity and well-being and “may be of significance in the context of trying to get older adults to maintain or increase physical activity, where appropriate, as we emerge from this pandemic,” Whittaker said.

For related coverage, read “Physical Distancing, Not Social Distancing.”

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