

Social isolation increases the risk of heart attacks, strokes, and death from all causes

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Those who are socially isolated are over 40% more likely to have a cardiovascular event, such as a heart attack or stroke, than those who were socially integrated, new research has shown.

The German study, due to be presented tomorrow at the European Academy of Neurology (EAN) Virtual Congress, found that those who are socially isolated are almost 50% more likely to die from any cause. The research also showed that a lack of financial support independently increased the risk of cardiovascular events.

Performed within the Heinz Nixdorf Recall study (HNR) and led by Dr. Janine Gronewold and Prof Dirk M. Hermann from the University Hospital in Essen, Germany, the research analysed data from 4,316 individuals (average age 59.1 years) who were recruited into the large community-based study between 2000 and 2003.

The study participants entered the study with no known [cardiovascular disease](#) and they were followed for an average of 13 years. At the start of the study, information was collected on different types of social support, with social integration assessed based on marital status and cohabitation, contact with close friends and family, and membership of political, religious, community, sports or professional organisations.

"We have known for some time that feeling lonely or lacking contact with close friends and family can have an impact on your [physical health](#)", commented Dr. Gronewold. "What this study tells us is that having strong social relationships is of high importance for your heart health and similar to the role of classical protective factors such as having a healthy blood pressure, acceptable cholesterol levels, and a [normal weight](#)."

Professor Jöckel, one of the PI's of the HNR added, "This observation is of particular interest in the present discussion on the COVID-19

pandemia, where social contacts are or have been relevantly restricted in most societies."

During the 13.4 years of follow-up, 339 cardiovascular events such as heart attacks or strokes occurred, and there were 530 deaths among the study participants. After adjusting for (removing the influence of) other factors that might have contributed to these events and deaths (for example, standard cardiovascular risk factors), a lack of [social integration](#) was found to increase the future risk of cardiovascular events by 44% and to increase the risk of death from all causes by 47%. A lack of financial support was associated with a 30% increased risk of cardiovascular events.

"We don't understand yet why people who are socially isolated have such poor health outcomes, but this is obviously a worrying finding, particularly during these times of prolonged social distancing," said Dr. Gronewold. "What we do know is that we need to take this seriously, work out how social relationships affect our health, and find effective ways of tackling the problems associated with social isolation to improve our overall health and longevity," said Prof Hermann.

More information: Gronewold J, Kropp R, Lehmann N et al. Association of social relationships with incident cardiovascular events and all-cause mortality. EAN Virtual Congress 2020.

Provided by European Academy of Neurology

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