

Sharing meals can help older Australians combat loneliness

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Older South Australians should sit down for community lunches regularly to combat social isolation that may become a serious health risk as they age, according to new research.

In the U.S., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has warned that loneliness in older adults can increase their risk of depression, dementia and even death. While estimates vary, it's understood loneliness rates among [older people](#) have reached 46% in Australia.

"The potential health consequences of loneliness for older Australians include poor immune function and psychological well-being, and increased rates of high blood pressure, [cognitive decline](#), anxiety, hypertension, falls, re-hospitalization and institutionalization—so social interactions should be prioritized and done quickly," says Dr. Georgia Middleton at Flinders University.

A new report led by Dr. Georgia Middleton and Professor John Coveney from the Caring Futures Institute at Flinders University has outlined the [potential benefits](#) of establishing community eating programs to address older people's loneliness and reduced quality of life.

The study brought together 12 individuals in Adelaide aged over 65, who were considered to be at risk of loneliness. They took part in a 12-week shared lunch program designed by Professor Coveney and fellow Flinders University researchers, to foster community inclusion and improve health outcomes.

Project Everyone at the Table (EAT) provided an opportunity for older adults living at home to socialize regularly over a meal, thereby developing their interpersonal skills. It also encouraged them to sign up to new groups and try new hobbies.

Participants filled out surveys measuring loneliness, quality of life and nutrition risk at the beginning and end of the EAT program, along with participating in interviews halfway through and at the conclusion of the program—and the results show participants benefited, with improved loneliness and quality-of-life scores.

Dr. Middleton says older Australians are at particular risk of experiencing [loneliness](#) because of their reduced mobility, less access to [economic opportunities](#) after retirement, or have lost their significant companion later in life.

"Our participants almost unanimously identified the opportunity to socialize with others as the best thing about the program," says Dr. Middleton.

"Some participants felt the community lunches allowed them to develop skills or the confidence to try other things and sign up to new groups and programs. Their responses showcase the power of social eating and the potential health benefits that can be fostered by social engagements centered around food."

"However, more work needs to be done to determine how to identify and recruit those in the community who would benefit from this program and ensure the sustainability without researcher intervention."

These findings support the results of another recent scoping study led by Dr. Middleton which showed that [social connections](#) established during meals consistently improved elderly participants' quality of life but had little impact on their diets.

Dr. Middleton says participants in the new study suggested that the program should be tailored to meet various needs for older people in the community.

"These suggestions indicate that there is not a one-size-fits all program that will meet the needs of all [older adults](#) in the community, thereby highlighting the need for varied opportunities to reach and meet the needs of an aging population."

More information: Georgia Middleton et al, Project Everyone At the Table: The Development and Evaluation of a Feasibility Trial Designed to Reduce the Risk of Loneliness in Older Adults, *Flinders University* (2023). [DOI: 10.25957/8bv7-w397](https://doi.org/10.25957/8bv7-w397)

Provided by Flinders University

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