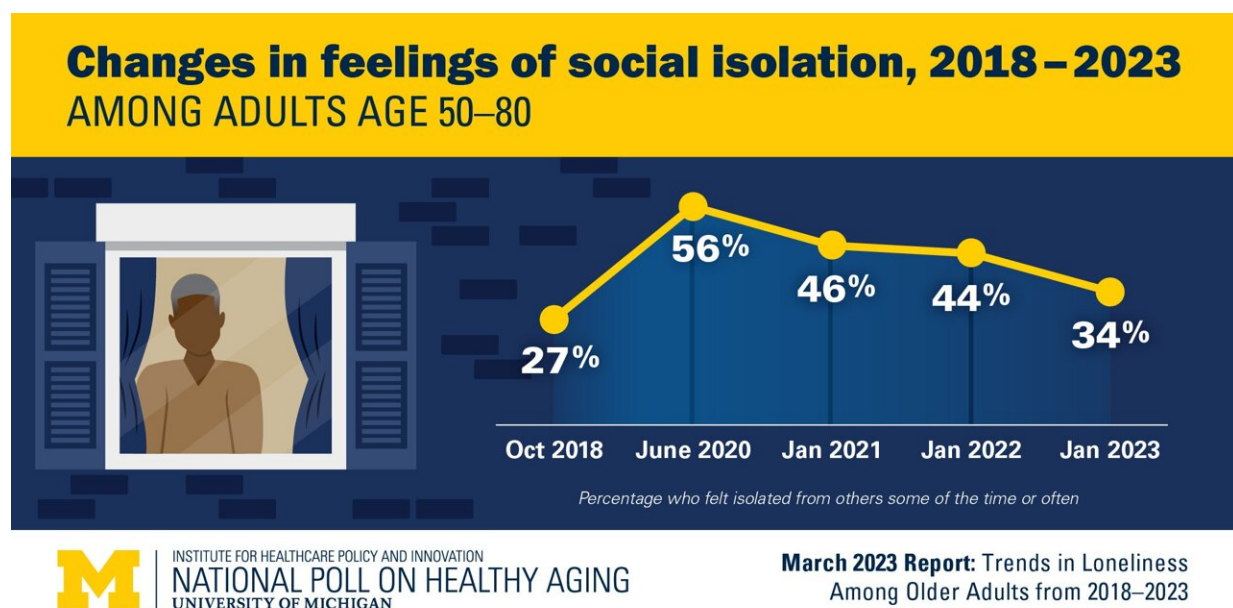


Poll: On pandemic's third anniversary, loneliness and isolation are down, but still high, among older adults

March 13 2023



Since 2018, the National Poll on Healthy Aging at the University of Michigan has asked a sampling of older U.S. adults about their experiences of loneliness and isolation. This graph shows data points from five surveys taken before and during the pandemic. Credit: Emily Smith—University of Michigan

After three years of pandemic living, loneliness, isolation and lack of social contact have finally started to decline among older adults, a new poll shows.

But one in three people between the ages of 50 and 80 still say they sometimes or often experienced these feelings, or sometimes go a week or longer without social contact with someone from outside their home. That's down from about half of [older adults](#) in June 2020.

The percentages who currently feel lonely, isolated or lacking contact were much higher among older adults who say their physical or [mental health](#) is fair or poor, as well as those with a health problem or disability that limits their [daily activities](#), and those who are not working or unemployed.

Around half or more of the older adults in each of these groups currently experience these feelings. That's a rate about twice as high as their peers who are in better health or don't have a disability or activity-limiting health issue.

The new findings from the University of Michigan National Poll on Healthy Aging, gathered in late January, add to previous data from polls taken in 2018 and during all three pandemic years using the same questions.

That allows the poll team to see that for older adults overall, these measures are nearly back to pre-pandemic levels, which were already high. The poll is based at the U-M Institute for Healthcare Policy and Innovation and supported by AARP and Michigan Medicine, the University of Michigan's academic medical center.

"Three years into the COVID-19 pandemic, we see reason for hope, but also a real cause for concern," says Preeti Malani, M.D., the poll's senior advisor and former director, and a U-M Medical School infectious disease professor who is also trained in geriatrics. "If anything, the pandemic has shown us just how important social interaction is for overall mental and [physical health](#), and how much more attention we

need to pay to this from a clinical, policy and personal perspective."

"Loneliness and isolation were too high before the pandemic, and it will take a concerted effort to bring these rates down further," says poll director Jeffrey Kullgren, M.D., M.P.H., M.S., an associate professor of internal medicine at Michigan Medicine and physician and researcher at the VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System.

"While we must always balance risk of infection with risk of isolation in older adults, we now know that a combination of vaccination, medication, testing, ventilation and masking can protect even the most vulnerable and allow them to engage socially," he adds.

The poll team notes that chronic loneliness has been shown by researchers to be associated with adverse impacts on mental, cognitive and physical health, general well-being, and even longevity.

More about the findings:

- 37% of older adults say they felt a lack of companionship in the past year, compared with 41% in June 2020 and 34% in 2018.
- 34% of older adults reported feeling isolated from others, down from 56% in June 2020 but still higher than the 27% who said the same in 2018.
- 33% of older adults say they infrequently (once a week or less) have social contact with family they don't live with, or friends or neighbors, down from 46% in 2020 but higher than the 28% seen in 2018.
- In general, rates of all three measures plateaued in 2021 and 2022, down from June 2020 highs, before dropping in the January 2023 poll.
- **Mental health:** Rates of feeling a lack of companionship were more than twice as high among those who say their mental health

is fair or poor (73%) than among those who report better mental health (excellent, very good or good). Similarly, 77% of those in the fair/poor mental health group reported feeling isolated compared with 29% in the better mental health group, and 56% of those in the fair/poor mental health group reported infrequent social contact compared with 30% in the better mental health group.

- **Physical health:** The differences were less stark but still large among those who reported fair or poor physical health compared with those in better physical health. Lack of companionship was experienced by 55% of the fair/poor group and 33% of the better group, isolation was experienced by 55% vs. 29% and lack of [social contact](#) was experienced by 56% vs. 29%.
- **Disability or health condition:** 51% of those who have a disability or [health condition](#) that they say limits their activity also say they experience a lack of companionship, compared with 30% of those without such conditions. The percentages were similar for feelings of isolation.
- **Living alone:** 47% of those who live alone report a lack of companionship, compared with 33% of those who live with others. There was a smaller but still measurable difference between the two groups in feelings of isolation.

"Despite the modest improvement these results show, social isolation and loneliness are still an urgent concern for older adults," notes Claire Casey, president of AARP Foundation. "Research shows that [social isolation](#) affects health and well-being, and can lead to unemployment. Greater economic security for older adults demands that we address loneliness."

More information: Poll: www.healthyagingpoll.org/repor...der-adults-2018-2023

Provided by University of Michigan

Citation: Poll: On pandemic's third anniversary, loneliness and isolation are down, but still high, among older adults (2023, March 13) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-03-poll-pandemic-anniversary-loneliness-isolation.html>

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