

# Research finds food and eating linked to social and emotional well-being

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Researchers at QUT have investigated the association between social isolation, or loneliness, and food and eating-related behaviors both during and outside of COVID-19 lockdowns.

Dr. Katherine Hanna, Jenna Cross, Amy Nicholls, and Professor Danielle Gallegos from the QUT School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences conducted the review.

Dr. Hanna said [loneliness](#) and social isolation had often been described as "epidemics" with growing evidence of adverse health outcomes, including earlier mortality, cardiovascular disease, dementia, and depression.

"There are multiple plausible pathways through which loneliness or social isolation, food, eating behaviors, and health outcomes could be interrelated," Dr. Hanna said.

"Some have directly connected the relationship with suggestions that people might eat to alleviate loneliness."

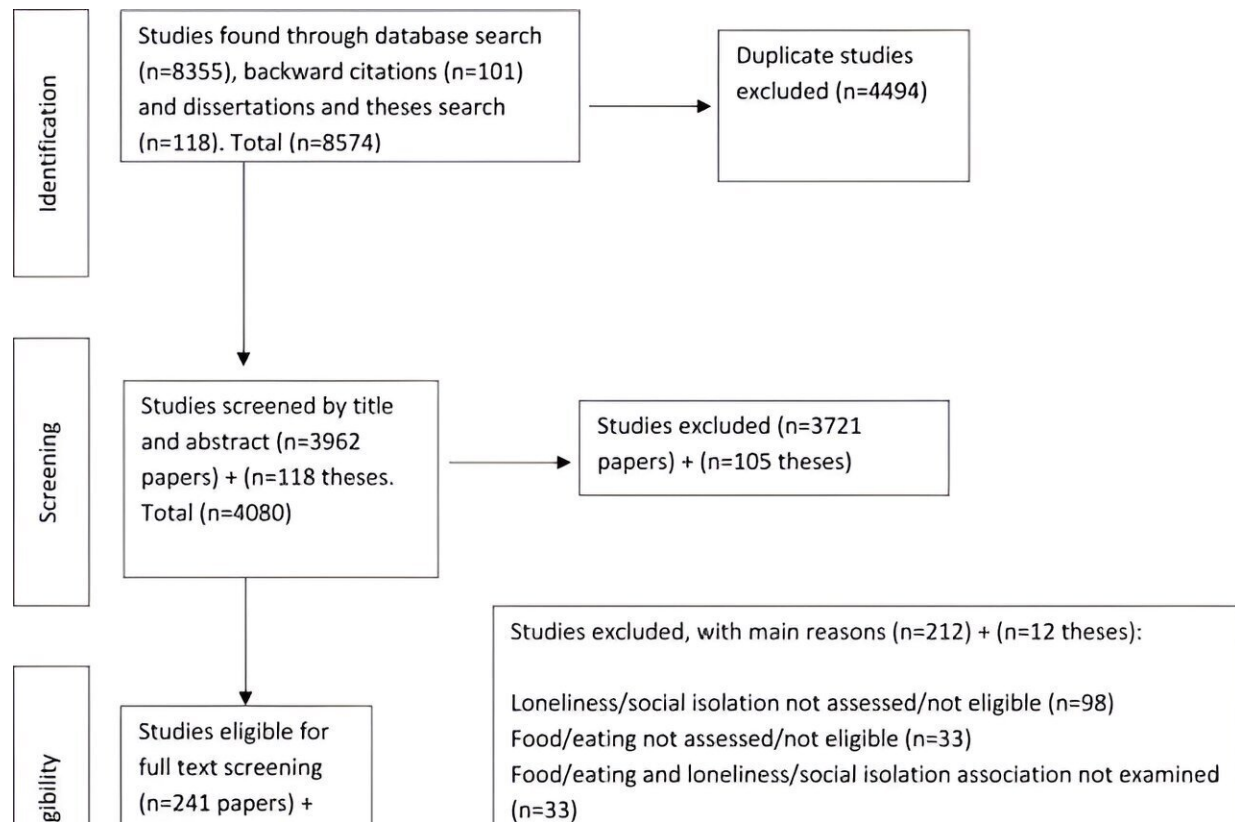
"And more broadly, loneliness has been identified as a component of emotional eating."

Professor Gallegos, who is the Chair of the QUT Centre for Childhood Nutrition Research, said conversely, food and eating could well influence loneliness/social isolation.

"Eating with others has deep social and cultural significance and has multiple possible benefits, including improved nutrient or food intake," Professor Gallegos said.

"Dieting and other food restrictions also could reduce the ability to bond with others over food."

"But it is not clear if there is the evidence to support these links."



Prisma flow diagram showing database search results. Credit: *Appetite* (2023). DOI: 10.1016/j.appet.2023.107051

Dr. Hanna said it was for those reasons that the research team felt they needed to conduct the review to explore the available evidence that investigated the association between social isolation or loneliness and food and eating-related behaviors—both during and outside of COVID-19 lockdowns.

"27 of the 29 studies that met the [eligibility criteria](#) found at least one association between loneliness or social isolation and one or more food/eating behaviors that would usually be considered harmful to health," Dr. Hanna said,

"These included lower fruit and vegetable intake, higher intake of energy-dense-nutrient-poor foods and lower overall diet quality."

"Eight of the studies were conducted in COVID-19 lockdowns, and most of the results suggested the association between loneliness or social isolation and food/eating behaviors had usually remained when people were in lockdown circumstances."

Dr. Hanna said some of the evidence had provided insight into the possible underlying reasons.

"For example, through consideration of the role of food and meals as strategies to minimize loneliness and the impact of eating alone on loneliness," Dr. Hanna said.

Dr. Hanna said caution in the interpretation of findings was needed due to the range of measures used to assess both loneliness or social isolation and food and eating behaviors and the inconsistent use of validated tools.

"Most studies only assessed a single point in time, so cause and effect cannot be determined."

Professor Gallegos said the findings indicated the possibility that part of the observed relationship between loneliness or social isolation and health could have been due to eating behaviors, justifying the need for further research to provide better evidence.

"But the results found in this paper could be of relevance to multiple groups, including policymakers, [health professionals](#), and consumers," Professor Gallegos said.

"The results could be of particular interest to dietitians and nutritionists who need to consider the potential impact of loneliness or social

isolation on food choices."

"But also, this review highlights to members of the public the possible importance of loneliness and social isolation influencing food and eating behaviors and the use of food to ameliorate loneliness and may help provide insight into personal choices."

Dr. Hanna said overall, the review illuminated the interconnectedness of food and eating with social and emotional well-being.

"And it highlighted that addressing food behaviors needs to consider the complex matrix of factors that influence [food intake](#)," Dr. Hanna said.

"Further research on this topic could allow for a clearer understanding on how to apply the findings in practice and the role of food and eating in the relationship between loneliness or [social isolation](#) and [health outcomes](#)."

The work is [published](#) in the journal *Appetite*.

**More information:** Katherine Hanna et al, The association between loneliness or social isolation and food and eating behaviours: A scoping review, *Appetite* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.appet.2023.107051](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2023.107051)

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