

Socially connected older adults hit harder by pandemic than isolated peers

June 8 2024



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Socially connected older people had a sharper drop in their quality of life and life satisfaction and a greater increase in loneliness during the pandemic than their more isolated counterparts, according to a new study

by UCL (University College London) researchers.

The study, published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS)*, looked at survey responses from 4,636 people in England (with an average age of 67) between 2018 and the end of 2020.

Co-author Professor Andrew Steptoe, of the UCL Department of Behavioural Science & Health, said, "It might be expected that older people who were already socially isolated would be particularly vulnerable to the disruptions and restrictions of the [pandemic](#)."

"In fact, our study suggests the opposite—that isolated older people were somewhat protected from the negative aspects of pandemic restriction, perhaps because they had less to lose in terms of social connections."

The researchers analyzed data from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, a nationally representative population study in England. Participants were interviewed in 2018-19 and twice in 2020—in June/July and November/December.

Just under a third (29%) of respondents were classed as socially isolated, depending on frequency of contact with friends and family, whether they lived with a partner and whether they participated in clubs, organizations or societies.

Prior to the pandemic, these socially isolated [older adults](#) had worse [quality of life](#) and [life satisfaction](#) and greater loneliness, but during 2020 their decline in these areas was less than their more socially connected peers. Life satisfaction declined about half as much, leading to isolated older adults having similar satisfaction with life during the pandemic as adults who were more socially connected.

Lead author Claryn Kung, a senior researcher at the UCL Department of

Behavioural Science & Health, said, "It is likely that socially connected older men and women experienced a greater disruption in their habitual routines and rhythms. In contrast, more isolated individuals may have experienced relatively fewer changes in their daily lives, with their usual routines and arrangements possibly being less prone to disruptions by restrictions during the pandemic.

"Our findings highlight the need to care for isolated older adults, but also to be attentive in times of crises to the impact of major disruptions in [social activity](#)."

In contrast to these effects, the study found that isolated adults experienced a greater decline in their levels of physical activity, widening the gap between the two groups, and remained more likely to be worried about their future finances. They did not on average change their likelihood of internet use, whereas more socially connected peers used the internet more.

The study received support from the UK's National Institute for Health and Social Care Research (NIHR) and the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) as well as the US National Institute on Aging.

More information: Claryn S. J. Kung et al, Changes in well-being among socially isolated older people during the COVID-19 pandemic: An outcome-wide analysis, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2024). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2308697121](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2308697121)

Provided by University College London

Citation: Socially connected older adults hit harder by pandemic than isolated peers (2024, June 8) retrieved 18 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-06-socially-older-adults->

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