

Daily Internet use is linked to social isolation

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New research has found that older adults who go online every day are more likely to be socially isolated than those who use the internet less frequently.

Published in the journal *Ageing and Society*, the researchers examined data from 4,492 adults in England, with an average age of 64. Overall,

19% reported high levels of loneliness and 33% were classified as socially isolated.

Led by academics from Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), the study found that older adults who went online occasionally (once a week or once a month) were less likely to be socially isolated than daily internet users, with daily users recording levels of [social isolation](#) similar to those who never went online.

Social isolation is an objective measure of a person's [social relationships](#), including the size and diversity of their social network, and the frequency of contact. The research, which took place before COVID-19 social distancing measures were introduced, found no link between [internet use](#) and loneliness.

Searching for information, sending emails and shopping were the three most common online activities, and over two thirds of those in the study (69%) reported using the internet every day. Those going online daily were more likely to use a smartphone, while laptops were preferred by less frequent users.

Lead author Stephanie Stockwell, a Ph.D. student at the Cambridge Centre for Sport and Exercise Sciences at Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), said: "Our findings suggest that older adults who reported using the internet weekly or monthly may have a [better balance](#) between their [real world](#) and online contacts, and it's possible that many in this category are simply too busy to go online every day.

"We were surprised that daily internet users recorded similar levels of social isolation as those who never use the internet. It might be that many of these people go online to combat their social isolation. Alternatively, going online more frequently might actually cause greater social isolation among some [older adults](#) as they reduce their physical contacts.

"Older adults with access to the internet are likely to be using it much more often at the moment due to COVID-19 social distancing restrictions, but our findings indicate this is unlikely to improve levels of social isolation."

Senior author Dr. Lee Smith, Reader in Physical Activity and Public Health at ARU, said: "One of the positive findings from our study is the suggestion that internet advertising and targeted emails could be used as an effective, low-cost way of delivering behaviour change interventions, such as [physical activity](#) or dietary advice, to otherwise socially isolated individuals. Indeed, this is a strategy that could be utilised during the current COVID-19 related social distancing."

More information: Stephanie Stockwell et al, Internet use, social isolation and loneliness in older adults, *Ageing and Society* (2020). [DOI: 10.1017/S0144686X20000550](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0144686X20000550)

Provided by Anglia Ruskin University

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