

## Health Consequences of Social Isolation

As people age, they can find themselves becoming increasingly isolated from their surroundings. Families grow and can become more distant. The distractions of life keep normal and frequent communication at bay. Careers come to an end and the social obligations of a so-called normal day take a hiatus. At times, people's only obligations are to seek medical attention or simply find nourishment to sustain life. While this may seem like an illustration of drastic decline in social norms, it's often the path on which older adults find themselves, steadily winding down as they age.

Some might say this is just a condition of aging, but social isolation is not just a condition of aging - it can also be a precursor to a number of chronic diseases that will keep people from living their fullest lives. According to an article in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, "socially isolated individuals are at increased risk for the development of cardiovascular disease, infectious illness, cognitive deterioration, and mortality." (Steptoe, Shankar, Demakakos, & Wardle, 2013) In the grand scheme, social isolation can be as serious as a heart attack.

Typically, individuals with a small number of family links experience social isolation. Those who choose not to interact with their available resources experience social isolation as well. Socially isolated individuals typically avoid neighbors, telephone calls, and participation in group activities. For these individuals, it's likely they will encounter one or more of the chronic diseases listed above.

Wyoming's Aging Division has programs and resources to assist individuals before social isolation has a chance to negatively impact older adults. With a focus on the population 60 years of age and older, but also a niche for disabled adults, CLS can assist in curbing the trend of social isolation. This is accomplished through the administration of Title III programs, as carried out in accordance with the Older American's Act of 1965.

Title III programs such as Title III-B, Support Services; Title III-C, Nutrition Services; Title III-D Disease Prevention and Health Promotion; Title III-E, National Family Caregiver Support Program, and the non-Title III program, Wyoming Home Services (WyHS), are all a part of CLS's available resources. While these programs are all intended to deliver some kind of direct service to eligible participants, they also work to engage older adults in social activities.

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Under these programs, multiple community partners provide a wide range of valuable services to Wyoming's older adults and disabled adults. Services include transportation, nutrition counseling and education, meal preparation and delivery, homemaker and personal care services, support groups, and even legal services. Most importantly, each of the services provided by community partners has a unique link back to engaging its participants in social obligations, reducing the amount of social isolation that an individual may experience.

Social isolation can be avoided for most aging adults. It is important for older adults to maintain a healthy social obligation within their families and communities. These relationships help to ensure that older adults stay engaged and are apprised to a wealth of community resources. In an attempt to curb the characteristics of social isolation and ward off chronic disease, learning more about staying socially active can allow people to stay connected, and age with elegance and dignity.

Source: Steptoe, A., Shankar, A., Demakakos, P., & Wardle, J. (2013). Social isolation, loneliness, and all-cause mortality in older men and women. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 5797-5801.