

A Lunch and Learn Companion FACT Sheet

As Canadians age, social isolation is a growing problem among senior citizens.

Seniors in Canada

The Canadian government estimates that the number of people over the age of 65 could double by 2040. Baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) are becoming seniors, and average life expectancy is increasing. While the average Canadian senior enjoys a life with better health and financial security as well as more activity than in previous generations, seniors are still at risk for chronic conditions, disabilities, or mental health issues. As families become smaller and separated by geography, the size and ease of accessibility for seniors' support networks decrease. Elder abuse becomes a possibility.¹

Seniors and Social Isolation

In Canada, seniors are at risk of becoming socially isolated. Our society puts little emphasis on intergenerational households, and religious communities are in decline. As people age, their physical and mental abilities decline. Often, seniors may live up to a decade after they've made the decision to stop driving. These factors limit a person's ability to interact with others. Seniors living in rural or remote areas of the country are particularly at risk, in part due to a lack of options for transportation.

Social isolation has a negative effect on a person's well-being—at any age—but the additional risks factors seniors face make combatting social isolation for the elderly a priority for non-profits and the government alike.

Risk Factors for Social Isolation in Older Canadians

The National Seniors Council's 2014 report on the Social Isolation of Seniors identifies these risk factors for social isolation:

- ▶ Living alone
- ▶ Being age 80+
- ▶ Poor health
- ▶ Having no immediate family
- ▶ No/little access to transportation
- ▶ Living in low income
- ▶ Changing family structures
- ▶ Living in a rural or remote area
- ▶ Critical life transitions like retirement.²

Ripple Effects of Seniors' Social Isolation

When seniors are socially isolated, the entire community suffers "a lack of social cohesion, higher social costs, and the loss of an unquantifiable wealth of experience that older adults bring to our families, neighbourhoods and communities."³

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Seniors benefit from being engaged in their community. Activities like volunteering helps increase seniors' feelings of self-worth and usefulness, and these activities in turn aid the community as a whole.

As social isolation sets in, social skills decline, fear of crime tends to increase, and elder abuse becomes more likely. As a result, seniors may be less inclined to make an effort to end their isolation by participating in social activities.

Evidence shows that social isolation can lead to a decline in health and an increase in damaging health behaviours like drinking, smoking, eating poorly, and becoming sedentary. Isolated seniors have a higher risk of falling and a much higher risk of being hospitalized. Research suggests that social isolation is one predictor of death from heart disease.⁴

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Canada's Efforts to Help Seniors

The Canadian government has begun efforts to raise awareness around social isolation and elder abuse, including these initiatives, quoted from National Seniors Strategy.⁵

- ▶ Launching of the Elder Abuse – It's Time to Face the Reality Awareness Campaign on television, print and online in 2009 followed by a public opinion survey that showed 91% of Canadians have a basic awareness of elder abuse.
- ▶ Passage of the Protecting Canada's Seniors Act in 2013 which amended the Criminal Code of Canada so that age is considered an aggravating factor for criminal sentencing purposes.
- ▶ Adoption of the Canadian Victims Bill of Rights in 2014 that gives statutory rights to victims of crime.

- ▶ Launching of the Government of Canada's www.seniors.gc.ca website in 2015 as online awareness and resource centre that includes specific sections on elder abuse and social isolation.

Ways You Can Help

Comfortkeepers.ca (quoted below) suggests the following ways to help prevent isolation and loneliness in seniors:

- ▶ Help seniors become more social-media savvy through their use of email, news sites and sites of interest and connections through Facebook.
- ▶ Provide companionship with conversation and activities such as cooking and eating together, reading aloud to the senior, playing games, scrapbooking, listening to music, or taking a walk.
- ▶ Provide transportation to seniors so they may visit family and friends, go shopping, attend events, and visit outdoor venues such as parks.
- ▶ Help a loved one find support and/or social groups at senior centers, YMCAs, places of worship—wherever seniors tend to gather.
- ▶ Also, as a caregiver, make sure that older adults who live alone take their medications as prescribed, eat healthy foods on a regular basis, sleep well, and get some form of exercise. Monitor them for these details, ask questions—and for extra support, encourage their family members to do so as well.⁶



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Sources

- 1, 3, 4 Government of Canada. (2014). Report on the Social Isolation of Seniors. Retrieved from www.canada.ca/en/national-seniors-council/programs/publications-reports/2014/social-isolation-seniors
- 2, 5 National Seniors Strategy. [n.d.] Make addressing ageism, elder abuse and social isolation a national priority. Retrieved from nationalseniorsstrategy.ca/the-four-pillars/pillar-1/addressing-ageism-elder-abuse-and-social-isolation/
- 6 Comfort Keepers. (2015). Loneliness and isolation can affect senior health in Canada. Retrieved from comfortkeepers.ca/loneliness-and-isolation-can-affect-senior-health-in-canada