

NEWS RELEASE

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A million lonely older people spell public health disaster

Commenting on new research by Age UK, which has found an increase in the number of chronically lonely older people, campaigners warn of a growing public health crisis.

A new Age UK survey has found that over one million people aged 65 or over in the UK describe themselves as feeling always or often feeling lonely[1], an increase from last year[2]. Two in five (41%) say that their TV or pet is now their main form of company [3].

This research builds on concerns raised by the Campaign to End Loneliness, a coalition which was founded by five partners including: Age UK Oxfordshire, Independent Age, Manchester City Council, Royal Voluntary Service and Sense.

A growing body of research is making a clear link between loneliness and a wide number of poor health outcomes. Loneliness has been shown to contribute to an increased risk of cognitive decline, clinical dementia, high blood pressure and heart disease.

The effect of loneliness and isolation on mortality exceeds the impact of well-known risk factors such as obesity, and has a similar influence as smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

Kate Jopling, Director for the Campaign to End Loneliness, says: “It should be a grave concern to health and social care managers that so many older people are now severely lonely. The evidence is clear that loneliness leads to avoidable ill health. If we fail to take this public health issue seriously now we may end up pushing already stretched services to breaking point.

“There are many dedicated organisations out there working to support lonely older people, but they cannot solve the problem alone. We need national leadership on this issue – starting with recognition that investing in services that prevent loneliness today will help avoid a public health disaster in the future. This needs to be a top priority for every local health and care service.”

Loneliness links to poor health choices:

- Loneliness is a risk factor for alcohol abuse, and may make it harder to give up excessive drinking[4]
- Being single or widowed decreases the daily variety of fruit and vegetables eaten (compared to people who live with a spouse or partner). Older adults who live alone and have infrequent contact with friends eat fewer vegetables each day. [5]
- Lonely adults are more likely to be smokers and more likely to be overweight.[6]
- Lonely adults are less likely to engage in physical activity and exercise.[7]

Loneliness links to ill health:

- The effect of loneliness and isolation on mortality exceeds the impact of well-known risk factors such as obesity, and has a similar influence as cigarette smoking (Holt-Lunstad, 2010)
- Loneliness increases the risk of high blood pressure (Hawkley et al, 2010)
- Lonely individuals are also at higher risk of the onset of disability (Lund et al, 2010)
- Loneliness puts individuals at greater risk of cognitive decline (James et al, 2011)
- One study concludes lonely people have a 64% increased chance of developing clinical dementia (Holwerda et al, 2012)
- Lonely individuals are more prone to depression (Cacioppo et al, 2006) (Green et al, 1992)
- Loneliness and low social interaction are predictive of suicide in older age (O'Connell et al, 2004)

Ends

NOTES TO EDITORS

- [1] TNS Loneliness Omnibus Survey for Age UK (April 2014). 10% selected Often or Always when asked 'Thinking about life these days, how often, if at all, do you feel lonely?' Population figures for the UK are estimates based on mid-2012 population estimates, ONS 2013, using the figure of 10,840,900 people aged 65 or over in the UK.
- [2] TNS Loneliness Omnibus Survey for Age UK (April 2014) shows a rise of over 289,000 or 38% from 770,000 older people from TNS survey for *Agenda for Later Life*, Age UK, 2013 16/01/2013 - 12/02/2013 (figures rounded at end). Both the 2013 and 2014 population figures were based on Population Estimates, ONS
- [3] TNS Loneliness Omnibus Survey for Age UK (April 2014).
- [4] Åkerlind, I. and Hörnquist, J.O. 1992. 'Loneliness and alcohol abuse: A review of evidences of an interplay' *Social Science and Medicine* 34(4): 405-414 <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/027795369290300F>
- [5] Conklin et al. (2013) 'Social relationships and healthful dietary behaviour: Evidence from over-50s in the EPIC cohort, UK' *Social Science & Medicine* 2013. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2013.08.018>
- [6] Lauder, W., Mummery, K., Jones, M. and Caperchione, C. 2006. 'A comparison of health behaviours in lonely and non-lonely populations' *Psychology, Health and Medicine* 11(2): 233-245 <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13548500500266607#.UoJalyeeZ6Y>
- [7] Hawkley, L. 2010 'Loneliness predicts increased blood pressure: five-year cross-lagged analyses in middle-aged and older adults' *Psychology and Ageing* March 25(1): 132-141

The Campaign to End Loneliness is network of local, regional and national organisations and individuals working together through community action, good practice, policy and research to combat loneliness and isolation in the United Kingdom.

Anyone can make their voice heard in their own area by letting their local health and wellbeing board know about the problem of loneliness and isolation – more information is available on our website: <http://bit.ly/1amMJCX>
The Campaign has five partners who lead the strategic direction of the Campaign: **Age UK Oxfordshire, Independent Age, Manchester City Council, Royal Voluntary Service** and **Sense**. More information about the Campaign can be found at: www.campaigntoendloneliness.org.uk