

Addressing Loneliness

In a recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, 22% of American adults said they always or often feel lonely. Another study by research firm Ipsos found that nearly half of all Americans say they sometimes feel lonely. Adults 21 and younger and older than 60 are at highest risk of experiencing loneliness. According to health officials from around the world, the number of people who self-identify as lonely has reached epidemic levels.

Loneliness affects your health. It can:

- Shorten your life by up to 15 years, which is equivalent to being obese or smoking 15 cigarettes a day
- Lead to psychiatric disorders such as depression, anxiety and schizophrenia
- Trigger the release of stress hormones associated with higher blood pressure, increased heart disease and cancer, and decreased resistance to infection
- Accelerate cognitive and functional decline
- Serve as a preclinical sign for Alzheimer's disease
- Increase your risk of death, stroke and heart disease



Researchers have three theories about how loneliness can lead to poor health.

1. Lack of encouragement from friends and family may lead lonely people to slide into unhealthy behaviors.
2. Biologically, loneliness may raise levels of stress or impede sleep, which harms the body.
3. Psychologically, loneliness can lead to or increase depression or anxiety.

Here are a few ideas on how you can address loneliness:

- Make an effort. When you're feeling lonely, reach out to others. You can also use technology to connect with your friends and family.
- Engage with others in your community who have similar interests. Consider taking a class through your local community college so you'll have a chance to connect with classmates.
- Get help. Loneliness can lead to or increase symptoms associated with depression or anxiety. Connecting with others may ease your loneliness, but it won't address deeper issues. You'll need professional help. Talk to your primary care doctor about how you're feeling. If your company has an employee assistance program, you have access to expert, confidential assistance for mental health conditions.

Sources: [campaigntoendloneliness.org](https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org)*, [kff.org](https://www.kff.org)*, [images.agoramedia.com](https://www.images.agoramedia.com)*

*Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan and Blue Care Network don't own or control these websites.