

## Physical Health and Social Isolation in Seniors

By 2036, seniors 65+ will represent close to 25% of Canada's population. Seniors can experience social isolation and loneliness as the result of changes in physical health. Isolation, in turn, can affect their quality of life and feeling of belonging in their communities.

### Health changes that impact social connections:

**Disabilities** — 42.5% of Canadians aged 75+ live with a disability, and 27% of seniors who live at home experience daily chronic pain. Trying to manage these difficulties and yet see friends and family can be stressful, exhausting and frustrating.

**Dementia** - Over 50,000 seniors in BC have a diagnosis of dementia. Of those, the majority (90 percent) will experience problem behaviours over their lifetime with the disease (e.g., wandering, agitation, physically striking out). The lack of a supportive social network is linked to a 60% increase in the risk of dementia and cognitive decline. Seniors report that when their friends learn of a dementia diagnosis, their circle of friends shrinks.

**Personal mobility** — Almost half of older adults living in the community report some type of difficulty with mobility, such as walking, getting upstairs and taking a bus. Mobility is one of the main factors helping seniors stay independent.

**Incontinence** — This common experience of aging can lead to embarrassment, depression and anxiety.

**Vision and/or hearing loss** — 40% to 50% of older adults experience poor eyesight, and 46% have hearing loss. Vision problems can increase the risk of falling and limit mobility. Noisy environments or difficulty understanding soft-speaking people may cause older adults to avoid public places, such as stores and restaurants, or social events, such as outings or parties.

### Health benefits of social connection

- Better sleep
- Reduced blood pressure
- Improved immunity
- Reduced level of depression
- Improved level of activity and exercise
- Less alcohol consumption

When **major illness** or **physical disability** strikes, a hospital stay can be especially stressful for older adults if they have become isolated and out of practice with talking to people, especially caregivers.

Once seniors who have been in a hospital are ready to go home, they are faced with new challenges: understanding medical terms, taking new prescriptions and managing their side effects, and arranging transportation to attend medical appointments.

It isn't uncommon for seniors to miss appointments, fail to pick up prescriptions, or even reject treatment altogether because of isolation and stress.



## Helping seniors maintain social connections:



### Provide Support

- Your involvement and support as a family member, friend or neighbour can make a big difference to an isolated senior.
- Find out about helpful resources in your community through your Community Seniors Resource Guide.
- Consider outreach programs like Meals on Wheels, which help to support socially isolated seniors.
- Hone your listening skills. Find resources that can help you talk to loved ones and others affected by aging. Talking about aging is unlikely to make seniors upset. They will probably appreciate the chance to discuss their problems.
- Identify signs of potential isolation or risks to health.

### Encourage Regular Participation

- Help older adults to build their social network and create a sense of community.
- Check out your Community Seniors Guide for activities that may be of interest.
- Encourage walking with a companion or participation in a walking program.
- Educate seniors, family, friends and clients about active living programs, seniors' centres and transportation options for older adults.

### Help Seniors Feel Connected and Valued

- For transportation options available to seniors in your community, check out your Community Seniors Guide.
- Help older adults find information, programs and services to help them feel included and to meet their basic social needs.
- Support older adults in finding meaningful social connections.

### Encourage Activities to Improve and Maintain Cognition

- Stimulate older adults' interest in enjoyable mental activities like socializing, crossword puzzles, reading, sudoku and playing cards.
- Encourage older adults to accept cognitive aging as a normal part of getting older and to find ways to work around it (write lists, set timers and alarms for appointments and events, and leave reminder notes where seniors will be sure to see them).
- Encourage seniors to talk about cognitive changes with others - friends and family members may have great suggestions for strategies