Medicare Spends More on Socially Isolated Older Adults

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Study Was a Team Effort

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Overview of Today’s Discussion

- Context: Social Isolation is a Global Issue
- Impact of Social Isolation on Health
- Discussion of the PPI/Stanford Study
- Policy Recommendations
Context for the Discussion
We’ve All Heard of the Silent Killer
Now There’s a New Silent Killer on the Horizon

SOCIAL ISOLATION

- Occurs when a person has few or no social connections
- Older adults are at risk for social isolation due to changes in their social networks
- Social isolation or loneliness has strong negative effects on health
World-Wide Recognition
Social Isolation on Health

The growing issue of social isolation has been recognized by the World Health Organization as a determinant of health.
Japan

The prevalence of social isolation among community-dwelling adults in Japan was **31 percent** for elderly living alone and **24 percent** for those living with family.

Canada

A Canadian literature review found that one in six older Canadians are socially isolated.

The U.K.

- More than nine million people (14 percent) in the U.K. often or always feel lonely.
Minister of Loneliness in the U.K

- Just two weeks ago, Prime Minister Theresa May appointed a Minister for Loneliness (Tracey Crouch) to develop public policies to address isolation.

- In addition, the U.K. Office for National Statistics will establish a method to measure loneliness
The United States

- Surveys suggest that **17 percent** of U.S. seniors are isolated.

- About **20 to 43 percent** of adults ages 60 and older experience frequent or intense loneliness.
Social Isolation Increases Risk for Poor Health

People who are socially isolated have higher risks for:

- Cardiovascular disease
- Infections
- Hypertension
- Premature cognitive decline
Being Socially Isolated is as Bad for Health as Smoking

Social isolation has been found to be as bad for one’s health as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.

That’s more than half a pack!
Not Only That, Social Isolation can Kill You!

Having social connections reduces the risk of early death by 50 percent

Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010.
Our Study
It’s Deadly, but is Social Isolation Costly?

**Research Question:** The health consequences of social isolation among older adults are well known, but is social isolation **costly for Medicare?**
To Learn the Answer, We....

- Linked nationally representative data from the **Health and Retirement Study** (to derive social isolation) to **Medicare claims** data (showing actual spending)

- We followed spending over an average of **five years**.
To Learn the Answer, We....

**Controlled** for factors known to influence Medicare spending:

- demographics
- health and functional status
- socio-economic status
- region
- living arrangement
- supplemental coverage
Major Finding
Social isolation increases Medicare costs by an estimated $6.7 billion every year.
Why Does Social Isolation Cost Medicare More?

Socially isolated older adults were:

- More likely to use skilled nursing facility care and when they did, they cost Medicare more.
- Not more likely to use more inpatient hospital care, but when they did, they cost Medicare more.
Costs to Medicare Could Be Even Higher

Total costs to Medicare could be higher, if you count:

- Medicare prescription drug spending (Part D)
- Spending on younger Medicare beneficiaries with disabilities
- Spending on Medicare beneficiaries enrolled Medicare Advantage private plans
Millions of Medicare Beneficiaries are Isolated

We estimate that there were approximately 4 million socially isolated older adults in traditional fee-for-service Medicare.
Who’s Isolated?

Socially isolated older adults were more likely to be:

- men
- depressed
- dually eligible for Medicare and Medicaid
- experiencing difficulties performing activities of daily living (bathing, dressing, etc.)
Who’s Isolated?  
It’s Counter Intuitive!

You might think that people who live alone or are single are more likely to be the socially isolated.

Our findings don’t bear this out.

That’s why it's important to not exclude certain populations from screening.
Policy Recommendations
How Do We Identify People Who are Socially Isolated?

Develop a valid and reliable tool to screen for isolation.

- Short
- Easy to use
- Adaptable to a variety of settings
After we Identify People who are Socially Isolated, What Do We Do?

Develop and fund partnerships to identify evidence-based interventions.

- Private-public partnerships are highly desirable
- Interventions need to be culturally competent
- Explore feasibility and desirability of using technology
What’s the Next Step?

Require Screenings in the Medicare Program

- Use Welcome to Medicare and Annual Wellness Visits to identify people who are socially isolated.
- Screeners should connect people to evidence-based interventions.
- The private sector is likely to follow Medicare’s lead.
How Do We Broaden the Conversation?

Engage the public health community

- Recognize social isolation as an **important social determinant** of health
- Work towards population-level **surveillance**
- Disseminate public health messages to overcome possible stigma
One Important Reason AARP is Engaged in Social Isolation

- AARP CEO Jo Ann Jenkins urges us to challenge outdated notions of what it means to grow older.
- That means we must also challenge the idea of the inevitability of growing older without adequate social networks.
- This call to action creates an urgency to find solutions.