Socially isolated older adults tend to have poorer health and a higher risk of death. This study is the first to show that a lack of social contact is also associated with increased Medicare spending.

Social Isolation

Social isolation is defined as a lack of contacts with others.

Social isolation is a significant risk factor for poor health and increased risk of death.

Older adults may be more likely than their younger counterparts to experience social isolation and its negative consequences.

Principal Findings

Social isolation among older adults is associated with an estimated $6.7 billion in additional Medicare spending annually.

- Each month, Medicare spent an estimated $134 more for socially isolated older adults ($1,608 more annually).
- The cost of social isolation to Medicare is comparable to that of some chronic conditions.

An estimated 4 million people enrolled in Original Medicare (14 percent of beneficiaries) have limited social contacts.

Socially isolated individuals were 29 percent more likely to get care in a skilled nursing facility (SNF) and their monthly SNF costs were $75 higher.

Additional Monthly Cost to Medicare for a Socially Isolated Enrollee and for an Enrollee with Selected Chronic Conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Social Isolation</th>
<th>Arthritis</th>
<th>High Blood Pressure</th>
<th>Heart Disease</th>
<th>Diabetes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Per month</td>
<td>$134</td>
<td>$117</td>
<td>$163</td>
<td>$241</td>
<td>$270</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Policy Solutions

Federal and state governments, in partnership with the private sector, should:

1. Develop a valid and reliable tool to screen for isolation.
2. Develop and fund partnerships to identify evidence-based interventions.
3. Screen older adults during Welcome to Medicare and annual wellness visits.
4. Elevate the discussion of social isolation in the public health community.
5. Include social isolation in the lexicon of social determinants of health.