Isolation Affects Men's and Women's Health in Different Ways

Older women who lack social connections and live alone are more likely to develop hypertension than their male peers.

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Social isolation negatively affects the overall health of older adults. Now, new findings published in the Journal of Hypertension suggest that this lack of social connectivity affects men and women differently, with women experiencing a higher risk for high blood pressure, reports UBC News.

For the study, researchers from the University of British Columbia (UBC) reviewed data from the Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging to evaluate the social ties of 28,238 adults between ages 45 and 85. Findings showed that women who were partner-less, participated in fewer than three social activities a month or possessed a social network of fewer than 85 contacts were more likely to have high blood pressure.

Average systolic blood pressure (the top number in a blood pressure reading) was especially high among women who were widowed, living alone and not socially active. Scientists observed the largest difference in blood pressure between widowed and married women. Indeed, widowed women experienced the strongest likelihood of hypertension across all categories.

For men, the results were much different. Single men, those who lived with others and individuals with the largest social networks posted the highest blood pressure readings. Meanwhile, those with smaller networks who lived alone had lower blood pressure.

According to study investigators, regular participation in social activities seemed to protect women without partners against hypertension.

"At a time when COVID-19 is forcing us to limit our social interactions, it's important for those working in health care and public health to encourage older women, in particular, to find new ways to be socially active," said the study's principal investigator, Annalijn Conklin, PhD, an assistant professor in the faculty of pharmaceutical sciences at UBC and a researcher with the Centre for Health Evaluation and Outcome Science.

Scientists said additional studies are needed to show how social connections impact cardiovascular risk factors.

For related coverage, read “Are Social Isolation and Loneliness Deadlier Than Obesity?”

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