

# Study investigates link between loneliness and age in elderly New Zealanders

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Loneliness is associated with reduced quality of life and morbidity and mortality and typically worsens with aging. Loneliness may be considered a public health hazard because of its association with a wide

range of conditions, including hypertension, cardiovascular disease, cerebrovascular disease, Alzheimer disease, depression and insomnia.

A study conducted by University of Otago researchers has examined the prevalence of [loneliness](#) in the elderly community. Titled: Comparison of Psychosocial Variables Associated With Loneliness In Centenarian vs Elderly Populations in New Zealand, the study has been published today in the international *JAMA Open Network* medical journal.

The findings were drawn from a pool of over 70,000 respondents to the international Residential Assessment Instrument-Home Care (interRAI-HC), an assessment model New Zealand has been the first to implement.

"The data available allowed us to examine the question of whether centenarians are less lonely than elderly people, and if so, are there any demographic and psychosocial differences that may account for this," says lead author Dr. Sharon Leitch, a Clinical Training Fellow from the Dunedin School of Medicine.

Dr. Leitch, along with Professor Paul Glue, Mr Andrew Gray, Ms Philippa Greco and Associate Professor Yoram Barak of the Dunedin School of Medicine found significant links between age, loneliness and mental well-being.

"Centenarians (100 years old+) were less lonely compared with elderly (65-99 years old) people, with our fully adjusted model finding a 32 percent reduction in loneliness for centenarians compared to the elderly," Dr. Leitch says.

This study identified psychosocial variables which are protective against loneliness in a large New Zealand dataset, including living with others, having family support, and lack of depression. Knowing these variables may help our society address risk factors for loneliness in older people.

"That centenarians were less lonely is interesting because centenarians are models of successful aging. We can look at the aspects of their lives that may help reduce loneliness. We found living with others and having family support were more common among centenarians, and depression was less common. These factors may well be due to [centenarians](#) needing more 'hands-on' care and attention, but for whatever reason were associated with reduced loneliness. Human connections are vital for our well-being. We need to consider how we ensure our elderly relatives and neighbours feel included and supported in society, to help reduce the burden of loneliness and avoid the negative health implications that can arise from it," Dr. Leitch says.

The research team is now investigating the interRAI-HC dataset to examine the interplay between loneliness, cognition, sensory impairment and physical health.

**More information:** Sharon Leitch et al. Comparison of Psychosocial Variables Associated With Loneliness in Centenarian vs Elderly Populations in New Zealand. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2018;1(6):e183880. [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2018.3880](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2018.3880) , [jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetw/article/2709717#201707021](https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetw/article/2709717#201707021)

Provided by University of Otago

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