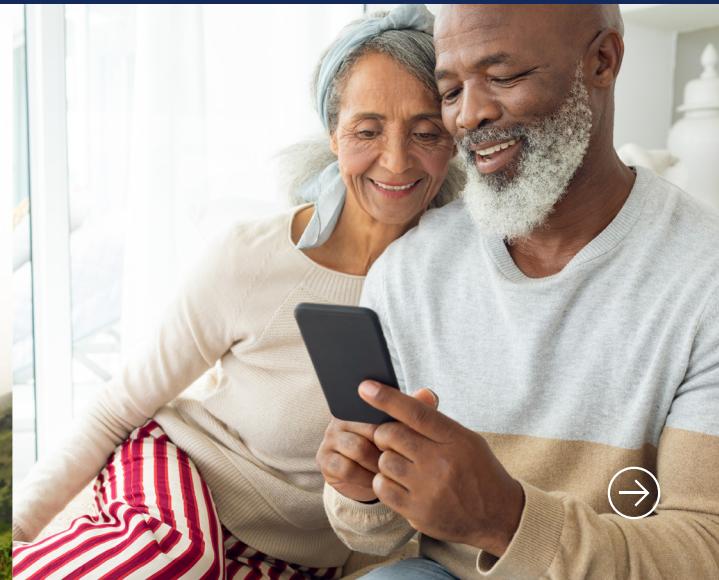


Seniors and the Surprising Power of Social Connectedness





“Older adults with strong social connections reduce their risk of chronic illness, experience less cognitive decline, and are less apt to be depressed.”



Most everyone has experienced the joy of talking with a friend, laughing with a family member, or being part of a group. Not only do these interactions provide support, relieve stress, and remind people of what's important—they also play a key role in improving the wellbeing of aging adults.

There is a wealth of research that reveals the negative impact that loneliness has on senior health as well as the numerous benefits of **social connectedness**, which is the support provided by social interactions and relationships. In fact, older adults with strong connections reduce their risk of chronic illness, experience less cognitive decline, and are less apt to be depressed!¹

The bottom line: If you're aiming to support senior health, then helping aging adults find ways to stay connected is essential. Make social connections easy to form and maintain, and you'll empower your members to improve their physical, mental, and emotional wellness.

Want to know more? Dive into this ebook to discover:



The mental and physical health risks that loneliness and isolation pose to older adults.



Why social connectedness promotes overall wellbeing, from increasing physical activity to reducing the risk of dementia and much more.



How seniors are currently connecting—and the types of connections they really want.



The ways Fitbit encourages social connectedness and movement in the growing Medicare Advantage market.

The trouble with loneliness

During middle age, adults are often surrounded by family and friends; they're raising children, caring for aging parents, and navigating the demands of life and work. However, as people age, it's easy for some of these social connections to fall away. Children grow up and leave the home. Friends move or pass away. And the activities that spurred connection—work, sports, kids activities, and hobbies—often shift.

- ✓ 56% of people older than 50 are socially isolated.
- ✓ 46% of older adults say they infrequently interact with friends, neighbors, and family outside their household.²

What is social isolation?

Social isolation refers to the state of having few social relationships or infrequent social contact with others.³ Living alone doesn't necessarily mean someone is isolated. On the contrary, an older adult can live with others and still experience some social isolation, especially if they're not integrated or participating in their community or household.



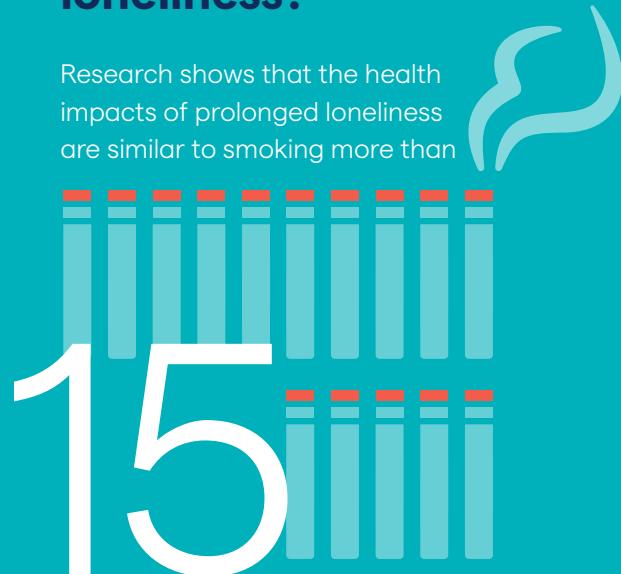
As people age, it's easy for some **social connections** to fall away.





How harmful is loneliness?

Research shows that the health impacts of prolonged loneliness are similar to smoking more than



How a lack of connection impacts health

Isolation and loneliness may seem like a small problem to address. But in reality, reduced social connectedness has a negative impact on health, especially for older adults. Research shows that isolation and loneliness increase the risk of:



Heart disease



Weaker immune system



High blood pressure



Obesity⁴

Isolated older adults also experience a 33% increase in the rate of decline in their motor function.⁵ However, the effects go beyond the physical. A lack of social connection is also correlated with:



Anxiety



Depression⁶



Decreased cognitive function over the span of four years⁷



Reduced social connectedness has a **negative impact on health.**

The power of social connectedness

If loneliness and isolation are risks to senior health, then social connectedness can be key to supporting and helping improve it. When researchers consider the relationships between social connectedness and health, they look at four factors:⁹

1

Social isolation. As noted, the absence of social relationships and interactions can have an adverse effect on the health of older adults.

2

Social integration. This refers to how involved a person is with informal social connections (spouse, friends, family) as well as formal ones (volunteer opportunities, group activities).

3

Relationship quality. It's not just about interacting with people. To improve social connectedness, adults need to be happy and satisfied with their relationships.

4

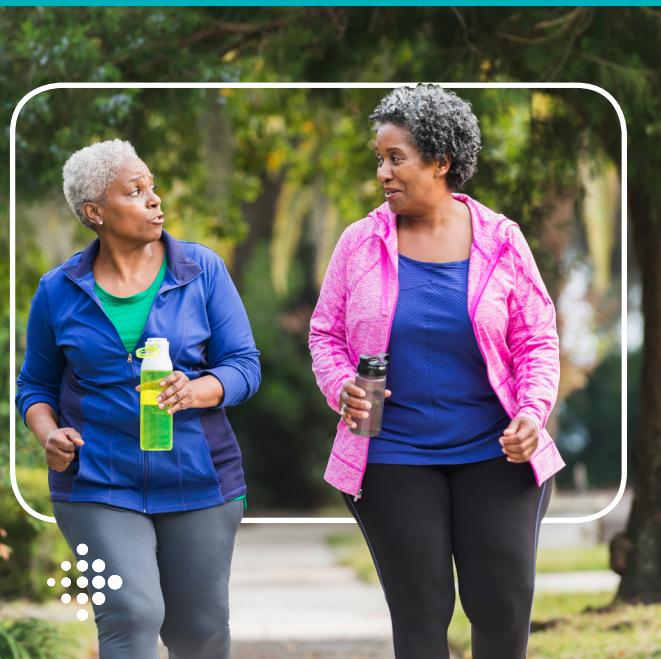
Social networks. This includes the variety of relationships an older adult has—from familial connections and marriage, to work relationships, neighbors, and more.

Social connectedness reflects a combination of these factors. And when aging adults are involved in their communities, with high-quality relationships and robust social networks, they are also often healthier.





of older adults who do not exercise are lonely.



Get together and get healthy

There are so many ways that social connectedness improves the physical health of aging adults, including increasing the likelihood of exercise and reducing the risk of chronic disease. Of course, physical activity and friends have long gone hand-in-hand.

Consider that more active seniors are also less lonely:

- ✓ 41% of older adults who do not exercise are lonely.
- ✓ 35% of those who exercise one to three days a week are lonely.
- ✓ 32% of those who exercise four or more days a week are lonely.¹⁰

Other research shows that social connections can help cultivate healthier habits. For instance, seniors who feel like they belong to a community are up to 22% more likely to participate in age-related health screenings. By doing so, they can identify potential health issues early and take the proper intervention.¹¹

Decreasing diabetes

One study showed that emotional support, the size of social networks, and a senior's relationship and living arrangements all impact the risk of developing Type 2 diabetes.¹² For instance, men living alone have 84% higher odds of a new Type 2 diabetes diagnosis and 59% higher odds of developing prediabetes.¹³ Their isolation contributed to poor eating habits at home and their lack of connection led to a more sedentary lifestyle.



Social connectedness improves the physical health of aging adults.



Social connectedness and mental health

Mental health is another vital component of overall wellbeing—and social connectedness plays a significant role in improving it. Middle aged and older adults diagnosed with anxiety, depression, and other mood disorders also have the highest rates of loneliness.¹⁴

On the contrary, another study showed that seniors who participated in group activities recovered from depression faster and were less likely to become depressed again.¹⁵

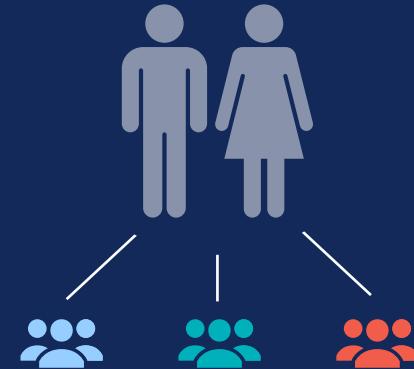
Fighting depression: The more connections, the better

The more group activities that seniors participate in, the less likely they are to relapse into depression.

- ✓ **24%** Seniors who belong to one social group saw their risk of depression relapse reduced by 24%.¹⁶
- ✓ **63%** Seniors who belong to three groups saw their risk of depression relapse reduced by 63%.¹⁷



Mental health is another vital component of overall wellbeing.



Seniors who belong to three social groups reduced their risk of depression relapse by

63%





Social connectedness and what seniors really want

Aging adults connect with friends and family in multiple ways, and they're increasingly leveraging technology to facilitate those connections. Consider that 73% of seniors text with their adult children. Nearly a third use social media to keep in contact, and one in five regularly FaceTime or video call.¹⁸

When older adults do get the chance to see their family in person, Fitbit research shows that they're primarily talking, sharing meals, and shopping. However, nearly half of seniors spend time outside with their grandchildren. Another third often do physical activities with their grown children or grandchildren.¹⁹

The top 5 ways seniors connect with family:

- 1 Phone calls
- 2 Texting
- 3 In person
- 4 Emails
- 5 Social media²⁰

The top 5 *in-person* ways that seniors connect with family:

- 1 Talking
- 2 Sharing meals
- 3 Shopping
- 4 Time outside
- 5 Traveling²¹

Our Fitbit survey shows that while connecting via physical activity is less common than eating dinner together, most older adults want to do more of it. For instance:

- ✓ 45% would like more activity-based connections with adult children.
- ✓ 51% would like more of this type of connection with grandchildren.²²

The feeling is mutual:

- ✓ 54% of adult children agree they would like more activity-based connections with their senior parents.²³

The Fitbit connection

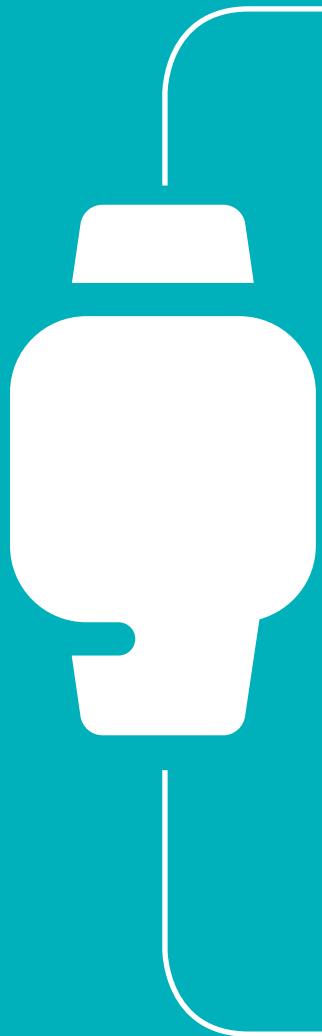
The connection between senior wellbeing and social connectedness is strong. But how can you empower your older adult members to improve their connectedness along with their physical activity? Fitbit can help.

At this stage of life, health and exercise are a balancing act. Seniors may not necessarily be able to—or even want to—join the younger generation in a fitness class or try to keep pace with their adult children on a bike. Walking is the happy medium; an activity that enables older adults to connect with their peers and family, and gets them moving at the same time.

For Fitbit users, tracking steps throughout the day provides motivation, positive reinforcement, and a way to connect with others. Our growing base of 2.5 million older adult users realize this and are leveraging Fitbit solutions to improve their overall wellbeing.

“My dad will be 83 years old. He’s always believed in the power of keeping active and has maintained a healthy lifestyle, but recently he’s really slowed down. His doctors tell him that in order to keep on living, he needs to keep on moving. We bought him a Fitbit for encouragement and now he lives his life by it. As the former CFO of an international company, he is driven by results, numbers, and schedules. The Fitbit is serious business to him; he sets his goal to reach 10,000 steps a day and he makes sure to attain them. I decided to get a Fitbit years ago and we are “Fitbit friends” now. I can cheer him on, taunt him, track his steps, and him the same to me. It’s so wonderful.” — Stephanie C.





The lasting impact of senior engagement



93,000

There are more than 93,000 members in the Fitbit Senior Community.



45%

of senior users have been with Fitbit for over three years.



35%

of active senior users track their steps at least 90% of the day.
This is more than any other user age group.



150+ mins

One in four senior users has accumulated 150 or more active minutes per week for 75% of the weeks they've had their Fitbit.²⁴





Better social connectedness, better health

The growing market of Medicare Advantage-eligible seniors wants to stay connected and maintain their health. Providing them access to Fitbit solutions makes it easy for seniors to prioritize social connectedness and activities such as walking every single day. And the results—happier, healthier, more connected seniors—can make doing so more than worth it. Learn how you can integrate Fitbit into your Medicare Advantage plans at healthsolutions.fitbit.com.

Connect with us today





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