

How do we identify socially isolated and lonely older people in Switzerland?

Key Messages

The Challenge

Social isolation and loneliness in older age have adverse health effects such as cognitive decline. Identification of older people who are lonely and isolated or at risk contributes to improved health outcomes in this group. However, this is a challenge because:

- Some individuals find it hard to reach out to others or ask for help due to the stigma attached to loneliness and isolation;
- Some individuals who prefer to live alone may not desire for high social connectness;
- There is limited evidence on how best to find the affected population and those who are at risk;
- Many people are not aware of the problem of social isolation and loneliness in Switzerland;
- Data protection and privacy are of great concern in the Swiss society and thus may impede data sharing between different institutions or organisations.

Options to address the challenge

- Enlist personnel in the community to identify lonely or isolated older people with assessment questionnaires and refer them to community activities that improve social networking;
- Use existing data to create heat maps that demonstrate the relative risk of loneliness and isolation at neighborhood level within a certain geographic area;
- Launch campaigns to raise awareness regarding social isolation and loneliness and destigmatize.

Implementation Considerations

Barriers to implementation include:

- Some people who feel lonely or isolated may feel embarrassed to admit their feelings, whereas others prefer to live in solitude;
- Loneliness and social isolation are public health issues that are not yet recognised by the majority of the society and there is lack of study evidence on this topic;
- Some identification strategies may be related to data protection and privacy concerns, which should be considered in program planning and implementation.

Potential windows of opportunity include:

- Local healthcare professionals, municipality employees, social workers, non-profit organizations such as the Red Cross, etc., can be included in program planning and implementation;
- Many potential partners come into direct contact with older adults in their everyday fields of work;
- Programs that target older adults, and those that address community participation or social networking can be easily established.