

Health Risks Due to Social Isolation Among Older Adults

October 2025



Social isolation, or infrequent social contact, limited support networks or opportunities for other social engagement, or experiencing loneliness, is such a profound threat to health and wellbeing that in 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General released an advisory calling attention to it as a public health crisis.¹ Factors such as older age, living in rural areas, having a disability, poor physical or mental health, and alcohol or cannabis use, or having other co-occurring chronic conditions can increase the risk of social isolation. As of 2022, nearly three in five (58%) Vermont adults, roughly 310,000 people, were 45 or older.² The impact of social isolation risk factors on the health and wellbeing of aging adults 45 and older is described below.

If you need help accessing or understanding this information, contact ahs.vdhhpdpanalytics@vermont.gov.

Key Points

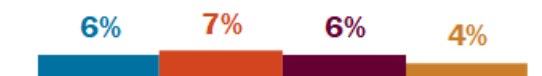
- **Adults 55-64 years old are more likely to report experiencing adverse outcomes related to social isolation compared to other age groups.**
- **Usually/always feeling socially isolated is significantly higher among those with four or more co-occurring chronic conditions.**

Social Isolation across the Lifespan

- Seven percent of Vermont adults 18 and older, roughly 33,300 people, report usually or always feeling socially isolated. Among those 45 and older, six percent or about 15,500 people, report usually or always feeling socially isolated (data not shown).
- Vermont adults who usually or always feel socially isolated range from 4% among those 75 and older to 7% among those 55-64. There are no statistically significant differences between age groups.

Usually or always feeling socially isolated is highest among 55-64 year old Vermont adults.

■ 45-54 ■ 55-64 ■ 65-74 ■ 75+



Always/Usually Feel Socially Isolated
Source: Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS), 2022.

Social Isolation Risk

Social isolation can be made worse by several factors within and outside a person's control.

- Adults 45 and older who report always or usually feeling socially isolated are significantly more likely to experience transportation insecurity compared to those who have access to transportation (31% vs. 5%), have poor compared to good mental health



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(24% vs. 4%), feel their overall health is fair or poor compared to those who rate their health as good or excellent/very good (18% vs. 5% & 3%), have a disability than those who do not (13% vs. 3%), as well as among those who use cannabis compared to those who do not (10% vs. 5%).

- There are no statistically significant differences in always or usually feeling socially isolated based on geographic setting or excess alcohol consumption.

Some demographics or behaviors can increase social isolation among adults 45 and older.

Measure	Usually/Always Feel Socially Isolated
Geographic Setting	
Urban area	6%
Large rural city/town	5%
Small/isolated small rural town	7%
Disability Status	
Any disability	13%*
No disability	3%
Transportation Security[^]	
Insecure	31%*
Secure	5%
Perception of General Health	
Excellent/Very Good	3%
Good	5%
Fair/Poor	18%*
Mental Health	
Good	4%
Poor ^{^^}	24%*
Cannabis Use	
Uses	10%*
Does not use	5%
Heavy Drinking^{^^^}	
Drinks heavily	7%
Does not drink heavily	6%
Binge Drinks	
Binge drink	5%
No binge drink	6%

* Denotes statistically significant difference within group.

[^] During the last year lacked reliable transportation that kept a person from medical appointments, meetings, work, or other daily living needs.

^{^^} Self-reported poor mental health on 14 or more days in the last month.

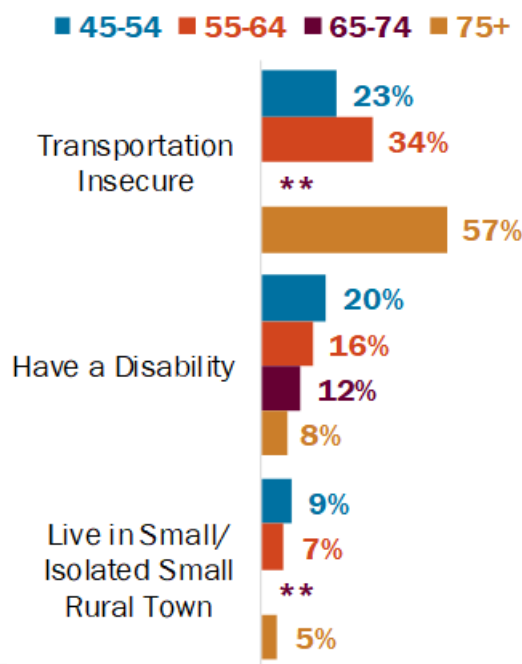
^{^^^} Drinks more than the recommended amount for older adults as defined in the 2020-2025 US Dietary Guidelines of Americans.

Source: BRFSS, 2022.

Social Isolation and Age

- Always or usually feeling socially isolated increases with age among people who lack access to transportation. Among adults 75 and older experiencing transportation insecurity, social isolation is reported at a rate more than twice that of 45-54 year olds. Differences are not statistically significant.
- Adults 75 and older who have a disability are significantly less likely to always or usually feel socially isolated compared to adults 45-54 who have a disability. No other differences by age are statistically significant.
- The rates of always or usually feeling socially isolated do not meaningfully differ by age when factoring in overall health status. This is also the case for poor mental health, cannabis use, and excess alcohol use (data not shown).

Rate of social isolation among physical factors that can increase the risk of social isolation by age

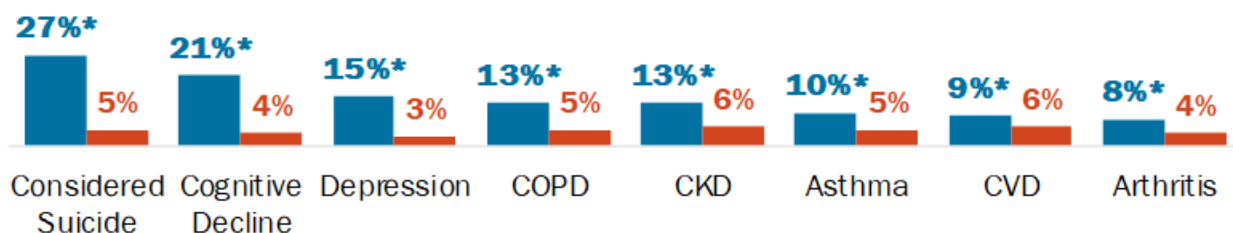


** Data suppressed due to small numbers and low statistical reliability.
Source: BRFSS, 2022

Chronic Conditions

The rate of usually or always feeling socially isolated is significantly higher among adults 45 and older who have considered suicide, report symptoms of cognitive decline, have ever had depression, have Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD), Chronic Kidney Disease (CKD), current asthma, cardiovascular disease (CVD), and arthritis than those who do not have these conditions. Always or usually feeling socially isolated does not significantly differ among those with and without diabetes, hypertension, or cancer (data not shown).

Adults 45 and older with a chronic condition are much more likely to always or usually feel socially isolated compared to those without a chronic condition.



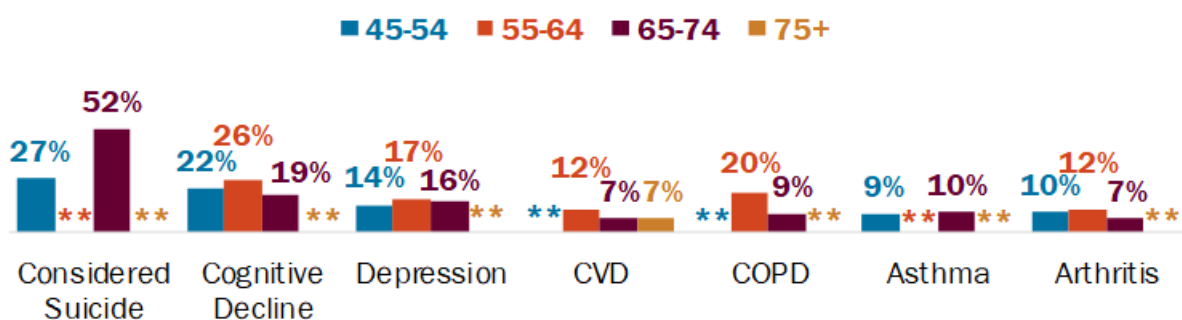
* Denotes statistically significant difference within group.

Source: BRFSS, 2022.

Chronic Conditions and Age

- Adults 55-64 are more likely to report always or usually feeling socially isolated if they have symptoms of cognitive decline, depression, CVD, COPD, or arthritis than other reported age groups. However, adults 65-74 who considered suicide are more likely to report feeling socially isolated than those 45-54. These differences by age are not statistically significant.
- The rate of usually or always feeling socially isolated cannot be stratified by age for CKD due to small numbers and low statistical reliability.

Adults 55-64 who have a chronic condition are more likely to always or usually feel socially isolated compared to other reported age groups.



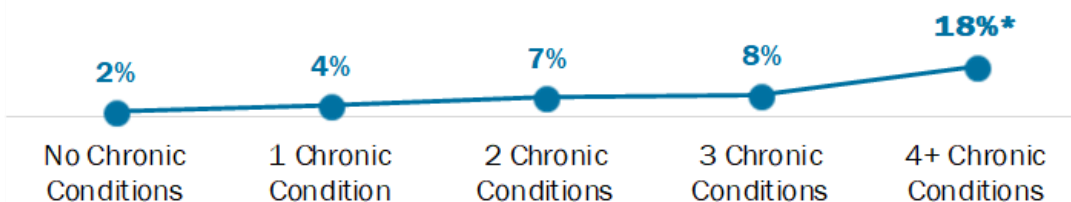
** Data Suppressed due to small numbers and low statistical reliability.

Source: BRFSS, 2022.

Multiple Chronic Conditions

Usually or always feeling socially isolated is significantly higher among adults 45 and older who have two or more chronic conditions than those who report not having any. Additionally, those with four or more are nine times more likely to feel socially isolated than those without a chronic condition.

The rate of usually or always feeling socially isolated increases steadily with the number of co-occurring chronic conditions.



Note: chronic diseases include asthma, arthritis, cancer, CVD, CKD, COPD, depression, diabetes, considering suicide, and symptoms of cognitive decline. Analysis excludes responses that did not include answers for all 10 conditions.

* Denotes statistically significant difference.

Source: BRFSS, 2022

Key Takeaways

The data presented here show that always or usually feeling socially isolated is more common among adults 45 and older who have a disability, experience transportation insecurity, have poor overall health, poor mental health, and use cannabis. Feelings of social isolation are significantly higher in the presence of virtually all chronic conditions. While variation exists across age groups, the greatest impact in feelings of social isolation for chronic conditions is seen in adults 55-64 years old who more frequently have higher rates of feeling socially isolated if diagnosed with a chronic condition. As the number of chronic diseases a person reports having increases, so also does the rate of social isolation.

Resources for Action

- Find resources in your county such as libraries, senior centers, Support and Services at Home (SASH) locations, adult engagement centers and more in the [Age Strong VT Social Connection Map](#).
- Participate in free chronic disease self-management and prevention workshops through [My Healthy VT](#) that also provide peer support.
- Sign up for the [Age Strong VT newsletter](#) to receive news and resources to support social connection around Vermont. (Complete the form at the bottom of the page)

Notes

The Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) is a random statewide telephonic survey of non-institutionalized Vermont adults 18 and older. Each year, approximately 7,000 Vermonters are randomly and anonymously selected to be interviewed and are then statistically modeled to represent Vermonters overall. Given this survey does not include institutionalized individuals, such as those living in long-term care facilities, it is possible that the reported values underestimate the true rates of feelings of social isolation in older age categories.

References

1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community. Published 2023. Accessed April 7, 2025. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-social-connection-advisory.pdf>.
2. [Vermont Population Estimates](#), 2022.