

# Health Post



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## Build Social Bonds to Protect Health

### The Power of Personal Connections

(NIH-News In Health) From an early age, we learn that nutritious foods and physical activity can help us stay healthy. Growing evidence now suggests that social connections may also be key to good health. Socially connected people tend to live longer. They're at lower risk for serious health problems. Social bonds are also linked to our mental health, eating habits, and much more.

Despite the links between our social ties and health, there's been a troubling increase in social disconnection around the world. About 1 in 3 adults nationwide report feeling lonely. About 1 in 4 say they lack social and emotional support.

#### Social Bonds

Many factors can contribute to a person feeling lonely. These include the quality of your personal relationships, your community, and society in general. Your personal health, life stage, and personality can also have an impact.

People who are socially isolated or feel lonely are more likely to have heart disease, obesity, high blood pressure, depression, or anxiety. They're also at increased risk for Alzheimer's disease or other types of dementia, and for early death.

Recently, the COVID-19 pandemic affected our relationships and feelings of isolation. But the breakdown of social bonds was growing long before the pandemic. Over the past few decades, fewer people have been joining community groups or faith-based organizations. There's also been a rise in single-person households. Digital technologies have made it easier to connect with others. But they can also expose us to harms like bullying.



Scientists are working to better understand the links between social bonds and our health. And they're looking for ways to counteract the effects of loneliness and social isolation.

"Humans are a social species. We are highly dependent on others from birth," says Dr. Elizabeth Necka, an NIH expert on social and behavioral science. "So feeling socially isolated can make you feel as though you're in a very stressful situation. And stress has been associated with chronic inflammation, which can have effects on cardiovascular health." Long-lasting inflammation has also been linked to cancer and other health problems. And our ability to biologically respond to stressors weakens with age.

Necka notes that there's a difference between social isolation and loneliness, but the two are related. Social isolation means you have few connections or contacts with others. Loneliness has to do with how you feel about being alone, or your perception.

"Some people can be objectively socially isolated but not feel lonely. They may enjoy the solitude," Necka explains.

"Others can be surrounded by people and yet feel very lonely because those relationships aren't satisfying to them." Both loneliness and social isolation can be harmful to health. Even people who feel OK about being socially isolated are at increased risk for poorer health.

### Who's at Risk?

Everyone feels lonely now and then.

But certain factors can raise the likelihood of persistent loneliness or social isolation. These include living alone, having trouble walking or moving, or having problems with vision or hearing. Other risk factors include financial struggles and mental health issues. Living in a rural, unsafe, or hard to reach neighborhood also

raises your risk. So do major life changes like retirement or the death of a loved one.

Many studies have found that older adults are especially likely to feel lonely or socially isolated. But a recent analysis of more than 128,000 people from over 20 countries reports that young adults are also vulnerable. "Over the course of the adult lifespan, we found that loneliness is higher in young adulthood and older adulthood. It dips during mid-life," says psychologist Dr. Eileen Graham at Northwestern University.

Graham and others have found that "generativity"—the urge to nurture younger people—can play a protective role. "People who are high in generativity are more socially resilient," Graham says. "They feel they're contributing to society, and they're teaching new generations. It promotes well-being." And it may help buffer against the harms of social isolation and loneliness.

"There's an interesting thing that happens in late life," Necka adds. "People tend to focus more on relationships that are high



quality and on the positive and meaningful impacts of those relationships. There's less focus on relationships that are a bit more casual. Research suggests that tendency in late life actually can be protective for older adults."

## Coupling Up

"Marital status, or intimate relationships, are also an important feature of our social networks," says Dr. David Sbarra, a psychologist and researcher at the University of Arizona. Married people tend to live longer and have other health benefits compared to the unmarried. But the quality of the relationship, whether supportive or fraught, can have an impact. "In a high-quality relationship, your needs are taken under consideration, and you perceive that your partner cares for you," Sbarra says. "This perceived responsiveness, or empathy, is key to intimacy."

Sbarra's team has found that divorce and separation are linked with changes to structures deep within cells called telomeres, which are associated with aging. Such changes are linked to health problems, including cancer and shorter life.

The team is now using brain imaging and smartphone apps to assess the quality of couples' relationships. They're studying whether repetitive negative thoughts in one partner leads to stress and health problems for both.

## New Connections

"If you're feeling lonely or socially disconnected, it can feel intimidating to try to form new connections," Necka says. "High-quality connections are best. But even brief interactions can make a difference. It can be a first step."

For example, you might go to the grocery store at the same time every week and see the same clerk. You can smile and strike up a brief conversation. Or you notice that someone at your regular bus stop always wears purple. You could chat about favorite colors. Over time, you might feel more comfortable connecting with others in different ways.

"If you see someone in your community, maybe an older adult who lives alone or a single parent, check in and ask what they might need. Let them know that you're available," Graham adds. "Offer to bring them dinner, play cards, or other things. We can reach out and help each other connect."

# Connect With Others

- **Learn something new.** Join a group interested in a hobby, such as knitting, hiking, birdwatching, painting, or wood carving.
- **Volunteer.** Consider helping out at a school, library, museum, hospital, or animal shelter.
- **Stay in touch with family, friends, and neighbors.** Connect in person, online, or by phone.
- **Share your knowledge.** Teach a favorite pastime or skill, like chess or baking, to a new generation.
- **Take the stage.** Take part in a local theater troupe, sing in a community choral group, or play in a local band or orchestra.
- **Help others.** Run errands for people with limited mobility or access to transportation.
- **Get moving.** Take a class in yoga, tai chi, or other physical activity.
- **Be more active in your local community.** Take part in community or senior center events. Join a faith-based organization that aligns with your beliefs.



# **NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEETING OF MEMBERS**

The Annual Meeting of the Members of Peoples Benefit Alliance will be held at 12444 Powerscourt Drive, Suite 500A, St. Louis, Missouri, on Wednesday, May 14, 2025 at 12:00 p.m. for election of Directors and for the transaction of such other business as may properly come before the meeting of any adjournment thereof.

The above notice is given pursuant to the By-Laws of the Association.

**PROXY**  
**Peoples Benefit Alliance**  
**May 14, 2025 Annual Meeting of Members**  
**THIS PROXY IS SOLICITED ON BEHALF OF**  
**PEOPLES BENEFIT ALLIANCE**

The undersigned member of Peoples Benefit Alliance does hereby constitute and appoint the President of Peoples Benefit Alliance, the true and lawful attorney(s) of the undersigned with full power of substitution, to appear and act as the proxy or proxies of the undersigned at the Annual Meeting of the Members of Peoples Benefit Alliance and at any and all adjournments thereof, and to vote for and in the name, place and stead of the undersigned, as fully as the undersigned might or could do if personally present, as set forth below:

1. FOR [ ] , or to [ ] WITHHOLD AUTHORITY to vote for, the following nominees for Board of Directors:  
Jay Delsing, John Perles and Ron Kotowski
2. In their discretion, the proxies are authorized to vote upon such other business as may properly come before the Meeting.

This proxy, when properly executed, will be voted in the manner directed by the undersigned member. If no direction is made, this proxy will be voted for the election of directors and officers.

DATED: \_\_\_\_\_, 2025

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Name (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

Please date and sign and return promptly to 12444 Powerscourt Drive, Suite 500A, St. Louis, Missouri, 63131 whether or not you expect to attend this meeting. The Proxy is revocable and will not affect your right to vote in person in the event that you attend the meeting.

St. Louis, Missouri  
April 7, 2025

# Roadside Assistance Member Benefit



Members of Peoples Benefit Alliance have access  
to 24/7 roadside assistance with Roadside Protect  
Motor Club

Covered emergencies include:

- Towing
- Flat tire assistance
- Jump start
- Lock-out service
- Fuel delivery service

Log in to  
[www.peoplesbenefitalliance.com](http://www.peoplesbenefitalliance.com)  
for more details on this member  
benefit

Terms and conditions apply.



## An Ounce of Prevention

### Pros and Cons of Disease Screening

Lots of diseases start silently. Conditions like high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and even cancer may have no symptoms at the start. Screening refers to looking for signs of disease in seemingly healthy people. Finding problems early can help you start treatment and make helpful lifestyle changes as soon as possible. Some screening tests have been shown to improve health and are widely recommended.

"We have great screening tests that have really lowered our rates of death and disease," says Bob McNellis, a public health expert at NIH. Teams of experts develop guidelines for who should be screened with these tests, and how often.

A new study looked at how screening contributed to help lower cancer deaths in the U.S. over the last five decades. "We found that 8 out of 10 cancer deaths averted over the last 45 years were due to prevention and screening efforts," says Dr. Katrina Goddard, a cancer control expert at NIH. Screening was the main cause of the drop in deaths from cervical cancer and colorectal cancer.

But screenings don't always make sense for everyone. Some tests may have potential downsides, or harms. "These could be physical harms. They can also be things like stigma or psychological stress," McNellis explains. For example, a test may suggest that you have a disease when you actually don't. This is called a false positive result and can lead to stress and unnecessary follow-up testing that may come with a risk of side effects. Other times, tests may miss cases of a disease. These are called false negative results.

Sometimes, a screening test finds a real disease that never would have caused issues over the person's lifetime. But that person may receive treatment because of the test results. This is called overdiagnosis and overtreatment. "Basically, there are no perfect tests," McNellis notes.

Experts continue to track the impact of screening tests over time and adjust recommendations. For example, screening tests for prostate cancer used to be common for older men. But studies found high levels of overdiagnosis. This led to many men having major surgery they didn't need. So prostate cancer screening is not commonly recommended for men 70 and older.



"Screening guidelines do change over time," Goddard explains. This happens because new research is always being done. For example, guidelines now suggest that many people start screening for colorectal cancer at age 45 instead of 50. Cancer rates have been rising in younger people, "and we have new evidence that they may benefit from colorectal cancer screening," McNellis says.

Your doctor will take many factors into account when recommending screening tests. These include your age, overall health, and personal preferences. Talk with your doctor before having a screening test.

Questions to ask can include: What are the potential harms of the test? How often do they occur? What's the chance of finding a disease that wouldn't have caused a problem? How effective are the treatment options if you find something? Am I healthy enough to have treatment if you discover a disease?

Many screening tests need to be repeated regularly to get the most accurate results, McNellis says. So even if you've been given a clean bill of health, let your doctor know if you experience any worrisome symptoms in between tests.

*Article reprinted from NIH-News In Health*

## Health Screenings

Talk to your doctor about the benefits and harms of screening tests. Common tests look for:

- High blood pressure.
- Elevated blood lipids, including cholesterol.
- Diabetes and prediabetes, including during pregnancy.
- Depression and anxiety.
- Sexually transmitted infections and blood-borne diseases, including HIV, syphilis, hepatitis B and C, gonorrhea, and chlamydia.
- Cancer, including colorectal, cervical, breast cancer, and lung cancer in some current and former smokers.
- Substance use disorders.
- Reduced bone density (osteoporosis).

Adapted from the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force.

The Health Post Newsletter is published by:  
**Peoples Benefit Alliance**

For information regarding your membership and association services, call or write:

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1-800-992-8044 or (636) 530-7200**

Articles in this newsletter are meant to be informative, enlightening, and helpful to you. While all information contained herein is meant to be completely factual, it is always subject to change. Articles are not intended to provide medical advice, diagnosis or treatment. Consult your doctor before starting any exercise program.

P | P E O P L E S  
B | B E N E F I T  
A | A L L I A N C E