

Impact of technology on social isolation: Longitudinal analysis from the National Health Aging Trends Study

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Abstract

Background: Social isolation is a key public health concern and has been associated with numerous negative health consequences. Technology is increasingly thought of as a solution to address social isolation. This study examines the longitudinal association between the access and use of technology and social isolation in older adults 65 and older, living in the United States.

Methods: This observational cohort study included community-dwelling older adults ($N = 6704$) who participated in the National Health and Aging Trends Study. Regression analyses were conducted using data from 2015 to 2019. Information about technology access and use was ascertained using self-reported questionnaires. The primary outcome was the risk of social isolation.

Results: At baseline, the majority of older adults that were not socially isolated had a working cell phone (88%) or computer (71%) and used email or text messaging (56%). Older adults that had access to (cell phone- incidence rate ratio [IRR] 0.62 [95% CI 0.48–0.81]; computer- IRR 0.63 [95% CI 0.51–0.78]), and used technology (email or text messaging- IRR 0.64 [95% CI 0.51–0.80]) in the year prior had a lower risk of social isolation than older adults who reported they did not access or use technology. Additionally, over four years, older adults who reported that they had access to a computer had a lower risk (0.69 [0.57, 0.84]) for social isolation than their counterparts.

Conclusion: In this cohort study, technology access was associated with a lower risk for social isolation among community-dwelling older adults. These findings suggest that technology has an important role in approaches that seek to prevent social isolation among older adults.

KEYWORDS

community-dwelling older adults, social isolation, technology