



Reducing The Impact of Social Isolation for Seniors During and After COVID-19

Presented by RAM Technologies, Inc.



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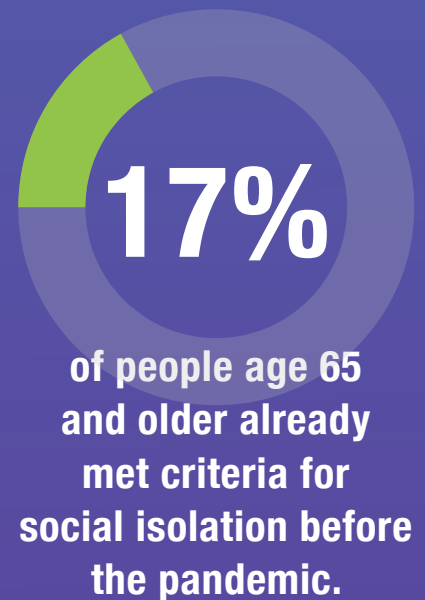
IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON SOCIAL ISOLATION AMONG SENIORS ¹⁻⁸

The COVID-19 pandemic has precipitated sweeping social distancing measures aimed at slowing the spread of the virus. These restrictions have changed lives for most Americans, particularly seniors, who are both more vulnerable to the virus and were considered a more socially isolated demographic prior to the crisis.



About 17% of people age 65 and older already met criteria for social isolation before the pandemic. Besides leaving people more vulnerable to stress, isolation can lead to negative health effects. Approximately \$6.7 billion in additional Medicare spending each year is due to factors related to social isolation.

As the novel coronavirus began spreading widely, the CDC recommended that people age 60 and older avoid crowds, and long-term care facilities such as nursing homes discontinue visits from family and friends. Even as social distancing rules are relaxed, the day-to-day activities that allow many seniors opportunities for interaction will continue to be curtailed. Experts are concerned about the effect that the loss of these connections will have on seniors' mental and cognitive health and that this could, in turn, worsen preexisting medical conditions, particularly as the situation extends over multiple months.



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It is said that necessity is the mother of invention. During this unprecedented time, families, friends, payers and community organizations have risen to the challenge and found new and innovative ways of reinforcing connections with seniors. These strategies run the gamut from sending a letter in the mail to using technology to enable remote interaction. As social isolation continues to be an ongoing concern after the pandemic has faded, health plans can learn much from these interventions to support physical and mental health for years to come.

REDUCING THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL ISOLATION ^{1,3,5,6,9-14}

Family members of seniors worry about their loved one's health and quality of life, not only during the pandemic but also in normal times. Fortunately, there are several steps that health plans can take to facilitate increased family support for their members.

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MAKING A PLAN

A first step toward preventing or mitigating social isolation is developing a communication plan that details methods of staying in touch with the older adult, the frequency with which this contact will occur and who will initiate it. This level of specificity ensures that caretakers understand their roles in checking on seniors in times of good health and illness.

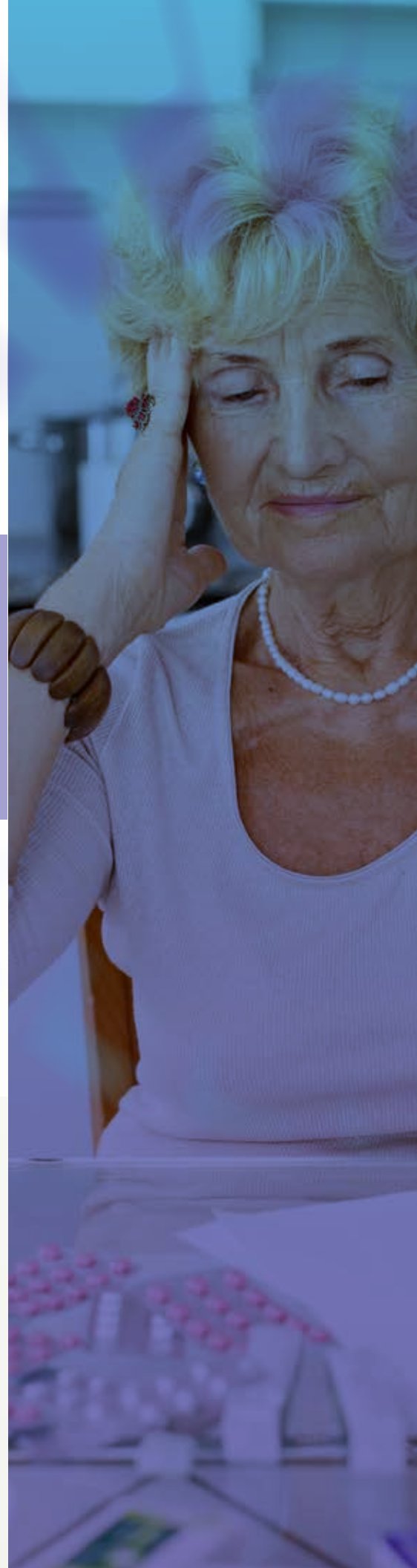
The plan should answer questions such as, “Who will help Mom get supplies like food and medication if she is housebound?” For those with a family member in a nursing home or other residential setting, it is important to know in advance how these facilities would handle an outbreak of illness. Community resources, such as faith-based groups and neighborhood websites, can offer valuable assistance in times of need and should be included in the plan. Caregivers also should proactively seek information about local mental health and counseling organizations.

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DIGITAL COMMUNICATION

People around the world have developed a new appreciation for digital communication and its ability to bridge the gap created by social distancing since the onset of the pandemic. Technologies enabling video calls, group communication and collaboration, text messages and email afford opportunities not only for one-on-one conversations but also such things as virtual dinners, exercise classes, educational experiences and birthday celebrations.

Virtual communication has been particularly important in compensating for lack of in-person contact among seniors. Many older Americans are now using some form of virtual communication to connect with family and friends, meet new friends and continue involvement in social activities such as book clubs, political organizations and faith groups.



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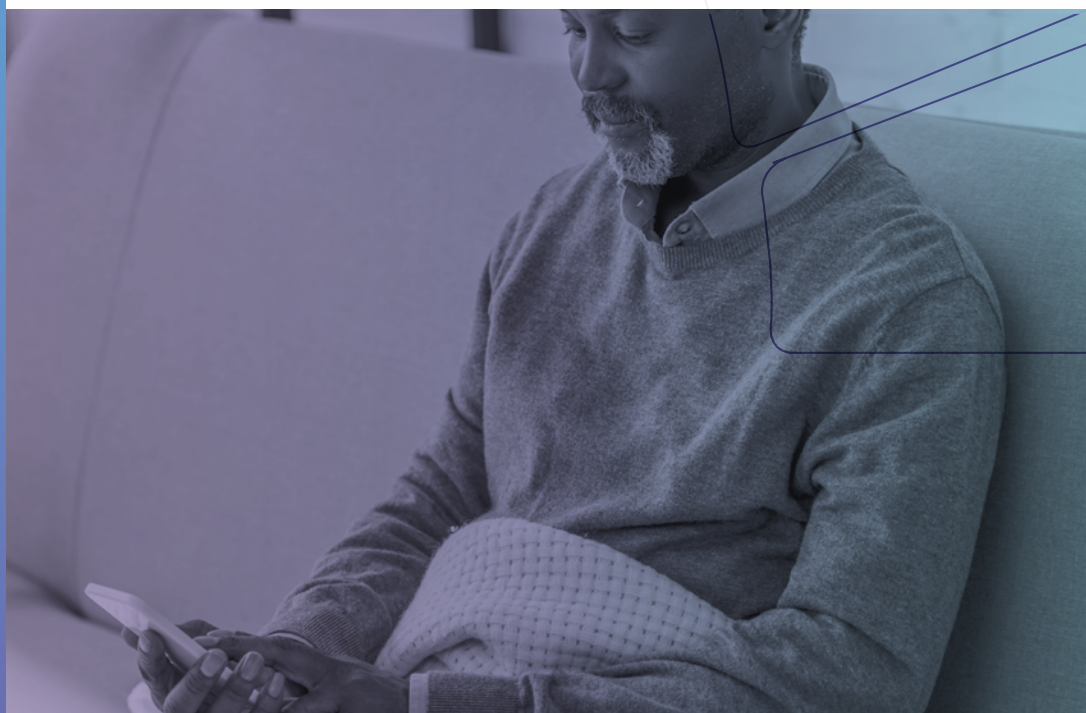
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Yet, even with this increased use, seniors still face barriers to digital outreach.

This is important as studies have found that seniors who participate in their communities are less lonely and that people who seek and maintain social connections are less likely to report social isolation.

For both the social and safety reasons described above, it is important for seniors to learn how to use technology. The baby boomer generation has increasingly embraced digital technology, with 73% using the internet and 50% using smartphones. Yet, even with this increased use, seniors still face barriers to digital outreach.



LOW-TECH STRATEGIES

Many low-tech strategies that are helpful to seniors during the COVID-19 crisis also will remain helpful after it abates. A handwritten card or letter brightens anyone's day. Pets not only help combat loneliness, but they also increase longevity in their companions. Connecting seniors and students is a popular way of fostering social connection through phone calls as well as the provision of practical help such as running errands, yardwork and dog walking.


BARRIERS TO DIGITAL OUTREACH^{5, 7, 13, 15, 21}


Despite steady increases in technology use, close to a third of adults age 65 and older do not have internet in their homes. Many older adults experience frustration when they try to use new technology and over half need assistance setting up or using a new device. Cognitive challenges associated with aging further complicate technology use for a subset of older Americans, as do disparities in income and level of education.


SPECIFIC CHALLENGES INCLUDE:

 Lack of understanding about modern technologies.

 Concerns about privacy.

 Outdated home technology, such as older computers without speakers and cameras.

 Internet access gaps, particularly for those with lower incomes.

 Public internet sources (e.g. libraries) closed during the pandemic.

Family, friends and payers can assist seniors in setting up new technology, teaching them how to use it and informing them about how to avoid scams. Some health plans already do this, offering education about online tools and training in applications that help seniors stay connected, such as Facebook and text messaging.

However, digital tools aren't the only answer. Telephone calls will continue to be important for those who cannot overcome these barriers and who may need additional help.



BEST PRACTICES FOR PAYERS AND PROVIDERS^{1,9,12,16-22}

Payers are taking a leading role in addressing social isolation, and several are trying new programs and have allocated additional resources since the onset of the coronavirus. These efforts include new community partnerships and enhanced screening for social isolation in seniors.

Despite its prevalence, there is stigma associated with social isolation, meaning few patients initiate conversations with their health care providers about this topic. Therefore, it is important for payers and providers to develop and implement proactive approaches, such as screening to detect social isolation in older adults. Providers should be prepared for conversations about social isolation and ready to engage support systems, including community partners and virtual resources, when problems arise.

One plan that implemented screening identified 2,000 lonely seniors and encouraged their engagement with community resources and organizations to reduce their loneliness, while also incorporating the screening results into EMRs for system visibility.

Plans also make calls to welcome new members and reach seniors by phone on their birthdays, contact points that can be leveraged to identify members' social determinants of health needs.

Temporary loosening of CMS regulations because of the pandemic has made it easier for MA beneficiaries to access telehealth, including mental health care, and referrals to these services may benefit socially isolated members. One major plan is piloting a program for MA members that pays for all social determinants of health needs as well as screening for health risks.

Virtual Well-Being programs that offer webinars and downloadable resources, as well as the use of health navigators, are other strategies that plans have employed to assist MA members at risk of social isolation.

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ONGOING SUPPORT POST-QUARANTINE

As the COVID-19 pandemic and its fallout continue, with vulnerable seniors likely the last to emerge from self-quarantine, the risk of social isolation expands to encompass larger numbers of older Americans. Increased risks to mental and physical health, as well as for cognitive decline, will continue to be faced by this vulnerable demographic.



While there have been many news stories about family members visiting nursing home residents and connecting through windows, there are technological solutions that appear to have the greatest potential to bridge the distance between seniors and their loved ones. Efforts to better match technology to seniors' needs and make it easy to use will go a long way toward promoting adoption and success in reducing social isolation. The bonus of these strategies is that they can continue even after the pandemic has abated, allowing easy communication and connection between family members and friends no matter where they live. Successful strategies will be based on proven outcomes and well-targeted to the differing needs of members.

It is imperative for payers to continue prioritizing loneliness and social isolation as key determinants of health and to develop ways to both proactively identify at-risk members and provide support to them. Support should now move beyond medical care and transactional encounters to those that also engage the humanity of the member and their loved ones.

Efforts to better match technology to seniors' needs and make it easy to use will go a long way toward promoting adoption and success in reducing social isolation.

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