

# Measuring Social Isolation



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## Identifying Social Isolation and Loneliness in a Population

There is no “gold standard” for identifying social isolation and/or loneliness. Some of the most commonly used tools include:

- UCLA Loneliness Index
- Lubben Social Network Scale
- Berman-Syme Index
- Duke Social Support Index

There are multiple measurement tools, each with different strengths and weaknesses. All scales have benefits and drawbacks, and most were developed for research purposes.

**A key aspect of selecting a tool is standardization within a specific organization so that everyone uses the same validated tool or set of tools.**



Standardization also ensures that no one uses only parts of existing tools or creates a new, unvalidated tool.

While some variation in choice may be needed for specific populations or health conditions, the chosen tool needs to match the concept being measured. (That is, if assessing for loneliness, you need to use a tool that has been validated specifically for measuring loneliness, as opposed to another aspect of social connection). It's important to recognize that neither one of these measures alone will adequately assess the overall level and quality of a person's social connection.

## National Academies of Science Consensus Study Recommendations

- Identification allows better targeting of specific clinical and public health interventions as well as high-need regions and populations.
- Social isolation and loneliness may fluctuate over a period of weeks, months, or years. Serial testing can help to ascertain changes over time.
- Existing tools must be updated (or new ones developed) to fully capture the experience of today's older adults.
- More research related to assessment is needed to determine specific implementation parameters, including who should conduct the assessment, the ideal frequency of assessment for different subpopulations, and the mechanisms for performing these assessments (e.g., annual wellness visit, during discharge planning).

## Lessons Learned from Data Collection

When collecting data to measure social isolation, organizations need to:

- Obtain consent from participants.
- Collect data in ways that honor privacy and comfort, consider access to technology, and that are accurate and efficient.
- Store data and match baseline results (pre-surveys) to follow-up results (post-surveys).
- Clean the data. Decide ahead of time how to address common issues like what to do when a question has been skipped.
- Analyze data to understand who is at highest risk and to detect any changes over time.

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