

Evidence Backgrounder

HOW DOES SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS BETWEEN NEIGHBOURS SUPPORT HEALTH AND WELL-BEING?

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Decades of research shows that being socially connected helps us live longer, healthier, and happier lives. But it isn't just our family ties, close friendships, or group membership that make a difference. Evidence reveals that the health benefits of social connectedness can be unlocked starting at home, with our own neighbours.

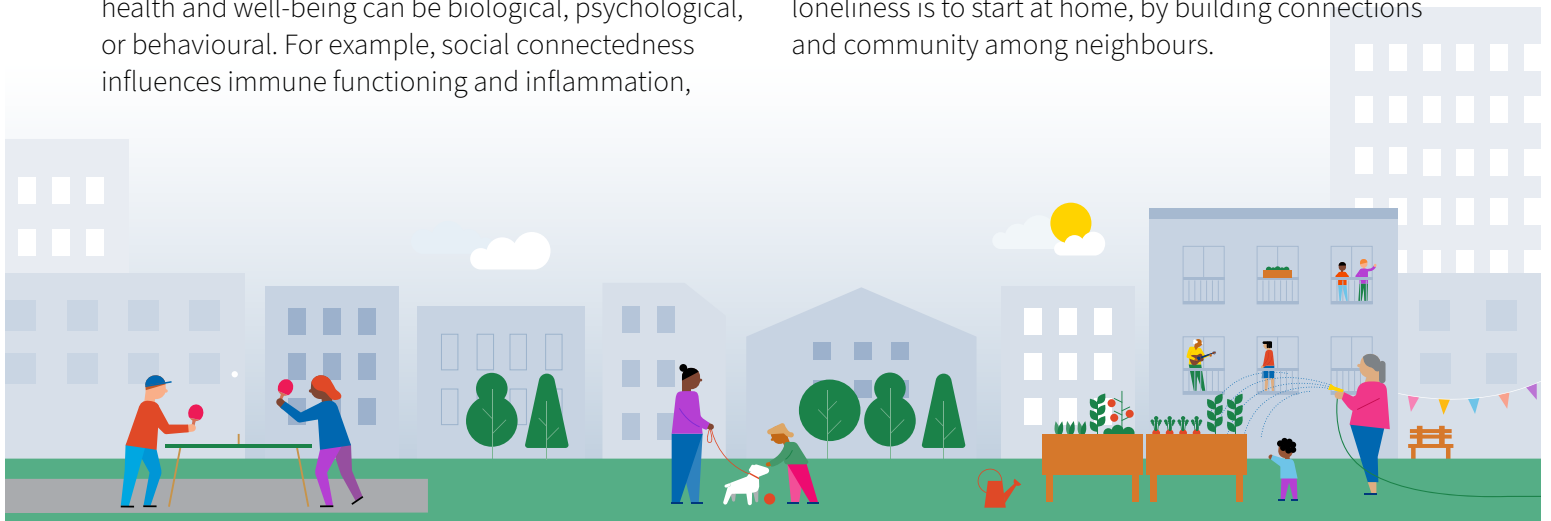
BACKGROUND

Social connectedness is vital to our health and well-being. Substantial evidence shows that people who are socially connected live longer.^(1,2) A lack of social connection — marked by social isolation and loneliness — increases risk for premature death by as much as 50%, comparable to major health risks like obesity, smoking, and air pollution.^(2,3) The effect of social connectedness on life expectancy is independent of other risk factors like age, sex, initial health status, lifestyle factors, income, and education. In addition to premature mortality, poor social connectedness has been linked to a range of other adverse physical, cognitive, and mental health outcomes, including increased risk of heart disease and stroke, respiratory infection, dementia, depression and anxiety.⁽²⁾

The influence that social connectedness has on our health and well-being can be biological, psychological, or behavioural. For example, social connectedness influences immune functioning and inflammation,

which has been linked to several chronic diseases. Supportive social connections also help us cope with stress, and influence healthy behaviours like sleep and physical activity.⁽²⁾

Given mounting evidence on its health effects, local and global declines in social connectedness are increasingly recognized as a public health crisis that requires policy action at all levels. New data shows that more than 1 in 10 British Columbians reported feeling lonely always or often.⁽⁴⁾ For young adults or those living alone, the proportion of people experiencing loneliness doubles to more than 1 in 4.⁽⁵⁾ In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States Surgeon General has described social connectedness as equally important to global recovery as vaccines. Evidence shows that one way to curb social isolation and loneliness is to start at home, by building connections and community among neighbours.



WHAT WE KNOW:

People who live in socially connected neighbourhoods report better physical health, mental health, and well-being.

- Frequent social interaction and trust among neighbors are associated with higher levels of happiness, well-being, and life satisfaction.(6–9) Evidence shows that neighbourhood connectedness is most important to life satisfaction for certain groups of residents — including people who are older, living on a low income, less educated, or in poor health.(9) A possible explanation for this is that residents who have limited mobility (due to health issues or lack of resources, for example) will be more dependent on the support of local connections, compared to people whose social networks extend outside their neighbourhood.(9) Differences in the relative importance of neighbourhood connectedness is also likely explained by the influence of major life events and life stages; for example, the neighbourhood may become more central when people have children, become widowed, lose their job, or experience illness or disability.(9)
- Neighbourhood cohesion (a measure of the degree of connectedness, reciprocity, and trust among neighbours) has been linked to a range of health behaviours and physical health outcomes, including lower risk of depression and cardiovascular disease, increased physical activity, and higher self-rated health.(10–14)

Connections between neighbours can be beneficial to health and well-being at all stages of life.

- When Canadian parents have strong trust in neighbours, their children are twice as likely to play outdoors in their neighbourhood every day, which is fundamental to their physical emotional, and social well-being.(15)
- For youth, living in a community where neighbours support, help, and trust each other is associated with a number of positive outcomes — including better

mental and physical health, enhanced feelings of safety and self-esteem, and less risky and violent behaviour.(16–18)

- For older adults, neighbourhood social ties are associated with better emotional well-being and self-rated health, lower risk of mortality, and decreased loneliness — especially for individuals who do not have children or a partner.(19) Similarly, well-being during middle and later life is found to decrease if contact with neighbours declines or is continuously low over time.(20)

Neighbours are an important source of tangible and emotional support — key ingredients for health and well-being.

- Neighbouring is a vehicle for accessing practical and psychological support that helps us cope with the challenges of everyday life.(21,22) In an international study on the impact of small acts of kindness during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing social support to neighbours lowered levels of loneliness. In addition, participants who knew at least six neighbours reported less loneliness, depression, anxiety, and financial concern.(23,24)
- Studies with older adults show that spontaneous interactions between neighbours contributes to a sense of community belonging(20,25), which is linked to higher levels of mental health, physical health, and life satisfaction.(26–28) Some research even suggests that for older adults, social support from neighbours benefits mental health more than support from family or friends.(20)
- One way that neighbouring might curb loneliness and improve health is through increasing people's neighbourhood identity. A recent study on the impact of Neighbour Day in Australia found that street parties and other events to encourage residents to build social connections in their local community led to a sustained increase in neighbourhood identification, in turn enhancing social cohesion and well-being.(29)

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 - [Bursting social bubbles after COVID-19 will make cities happier and healthier again](#)
 - [Socially connected communities: Solutions for social isolation](#)
 - [How sociable is life in multi-unit rental housing?](#)

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