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WVU Health News



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Lonely seniors at higher risk for chronic illness

Isolation breeds depression, more doctor visits, WVU researcher finds

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. – A West Virginia University faculty member – examining the links between loneliness and chronic illness in older Americans – has found that isolated older adults suffer more depression, make more doctor visits and experience longer nursing home stays than other seniors.

Laurie A. Theeke, Ph.D., is a faculty member in the WVU School of Nursing and an advanced practice clinical nurse in the Clark K. Sleeth Family Medicine Center at WVU. Her analysis of sociodemographic and health-related risks for loneliness is published in October's Archives of Psychiatric Nursing.

She drew her analysis from Health and Retirement Study Data sponsored by the U.S. National Institute on Aging. Another study will soon be published in the journal Research in Gerontological Nursing.

“The first article was based on one wave of data from 2002 and studied only those 65 and older,” Theeke said.

Her work identified predictors for loneliness.



“The primary predictor for loneliness was not being married,” she said. “Widows were worse than people who had chosen to not be married, never married or divorced. The other major predictors were poor health perception, number of chronic illnesses and functional impairment.”

The article that is still in press looks at both 2002 and 2004 data and includes adults ages 50 and over.

“The main difference is that we took this analysis further to look at outcome differences for those who report experiencing loneliness,” Theeke said.

“People who said they were lonely were more likely to smoke, have depression, more likely to visit the doctor and less likely to exercise. They also spent a greater number of nights in a nursing home and, in a two-year period, had a greater increase in the number of chronic illnesses. Most participants had at least one chronic illness such as high blood pressure.”

Theeke will report her findings collected from surveys of patients at WVU’s Department of Family Medicine clinics at the annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America in Atlanta Nov. 19.

“The data are not only able to give us a look at loneliness and chronic illness but also at quality of life,” Theeke said.

The WVU School of Nursing is home to the Quality of Life Institute.

“We’re just starting to look at people living in Appalachia,” she said. “There are a lot of differences between West Virginia and the nation and a lot of differences between Appalachia and the nation. We want to see if in Appalachia these same things (predictors of loneliness) are present in older populations.”

Theeke’s patients who ranked themselves moderately lonely took more than seven prescriptions each, experienced some functional impairment and lived with three chronic illnesses – yet they rated themselves as having high quality of life.

“As long as they have the ability to do things during the day such as babysit a grandchild, go to their

clubs, go to church, they say they have good quality of life,” Theeke said.

Theeke, an assistant professor, teaches theory and nursing research in the graduate program. She completed her Ph.D. degree at WVU School of Nursing in 2007.

For information on the School of Nursing see www.hsc.wvu.edu/son.

For Laurie Theeke’s article in the Archives of Psychiatric Nursing see [http://www.psychiatricnursing.org/article/S0883-9417\(08\)00198-2/abstract](http://www.psychiatricnursing.org/article/S0883-9417(08)00198-2/abstract).

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