

Social isolation of older people (part 2) prevalence of four types of "social isolation"

Hirai. H*, Kondo. K*, Ichida** Y, Suemori. K*

*Nihon Fukushi University, **Kyoto University

Background & Purpose:

Social isolation is a risk factor of "loss of healthy life", as previous research has indicated causal relationship between social isolation and functional decline. Social isolation can be defined in several ways, focusing on "leaving home" or "contacting others" or both. However, characteristics of these definitions are unclear. This study shows the prevalence of each "social isolated" elderly people by gender, age group, socioeconomic status, psychological status and the regional characteristics of the municipalities they lived.

Methods:

Subjects were 32,891 people aged 65 years and older without disability, representable sample of 15 municipalities in 2003. Subjects were divided into urban, suburban and rural residents by Population Density and Employment Rate to the Primary Industry of their municipality. We defined 4 types of socially isolated elderly as follows: Type-A: going out less than once a week. Type-B: contacting friends less than once a week. Type-C: contacting relatives living apart less than once a week. Type-D: going out less than once a week and contacting others less than once a week.

Results:

1. Distribution of socially isolated people for each gender and age group: In the younger group, the rates of type-A and type-D were high in males and low in females, but in the older group the result was the opposite. The rates of type-B and type-C were higher in males than females for all age groups. The rates of type-A, type-B and type-D were high in the older groups and low in the younger groups, but the type-C showed the opposite result. Age was significantly related to all definition of "social isolation", so the following analyses were done adjusting for age. 2. Socioeconomic status (SES): In the lower SES group, the rate of type-A was high, but the rate of type-C was high in the higher SES group. SES significantly related to all definitions of social isolation in males, but not females. 3. Psychological status: all poor condition of psychological status significantly related to social isolation. 4. Difference among urban, suburban and rural residents: The rate of type-A and type-D were high in rural and low in urban areas. In type-B, result was the opposite. The rate of type-C was not significantly different between urban and rural areas.

Conclusion:

The rate of "social isolation" varied for gender, SES, psychological status and region. Not only lower SES group or rural residents, but also higher SES groups or urban residents have risks of "social isolation".

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