

Long-term Effects of Social Isolation on Chronic Disease and Depressive Symptoms in Middle-aged and Older Koreans: Evidence from the Korean Longitudinal Study of Ageing (KLoSA)

Objective: This study examined the longitudinal effects of social isolation on chronic disease and depressive symptoms in middle-aged and older Koreans across time (2014-2022) and the gender differences in these associations.

Method: Data were obtained from Waves 5, 7, and 9 of the Korean Longitudinal Study of Ageing (KLoSA), using a sample of 5,585 participants who took part in all three surveys. Longitudinal path analysis was performed to investigate these associations.

Results: There were significant auto-regressive effects of social isolation, chronic disease, and depressive symptoms over time, and most contemporary effects among the three variables were significant. Cross-lagged effects were more apparent in the associations between social isolation and depressive symptoms than between social isolation and chronic disease. Additionally, there was only one significant gender difference in the path from social isolation at Wave 7 to depressive symptoms at Wave 7. Significant mediational effects were found in the paths from early social isolation to later chronic disease and later depressive symptoms for both gender groups.

Conclusion: This study confirmed the long-term effects of social isolation on chronic disease and depressive symptoms in middle-aged and older Koreans. This indicates the importance of social engagement and social networks in the community, as well as early intervention to improve physical and mental health, particularly targeting socially disadvantaged groups such as middle-aged and older adults.

Key Words: Social isolation, chronic disease, depressive symptoms, middle-aged and older adults