

Cooperative Extension

Promoting Healthy Families, Schools and Communities: Making a Difference

Tips To Help Older Adults Beat The Holiday Blues

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Although the holidays are often associated with good food, family, and friends, they can also be challenging for many older adults who experience social isolation and loneliness. The US Surgeon General has identified social isolation and loneliness as important public health concerns increasingly recognized as health risks during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Loneliness is associated with an increased risk of heart disease, dementia, stroke, anxiety, and depression. In contrast, social connection is associated with increased longevity and better social, emotional, and physical well-being.

What is the difference between social isolation and loneliness?

Although related, social isolation and loneliness are different. Loneliness is the distressing feeling of being alone or separated, while social isolation is the lack of social contacts and having few people to interact with regularly. One can live alone and not feel lonely or socially isolated, while conversely someone may feel lonely even when being with others. As we age, we are at higher risk for social isolation and loneliness that may result from hearing, vision, and memory loss, disability, decreased mobility, inability to access transportation, and/or the loss of family and friends. The risk of loneliness increases with social isolation.



How common are social isolation and loneliness?

In January 2023, the University of Michigan National Poll on Healthy Aging reported that 34% of older US adults (aged 50-80) reported feeling socially isolated, and 37% experienced loneliness. Loneliness affected women more than men and was particularly common among individuals with poorer physical and mental health, those with a health condition or disability that limited daily activities, and those who were unemployed, lived alone or were aged 50 to 64 years (compared with 65-80 years).

Tips to decrease or prevent social isolation and loneliness

Social connections can reduce social isolation and loneliness during the holidays. Some tips to decrease social isolation and loneliness include:

- ◆ Schedule daily time to be in touch with family, friends, or neighbors.
- ◆ Attend events and programs at local senior centers or libraries.
- ◆ Engage in online classes, lectures, and faith-based or social groups.
- ◆ Participate in group exercise classes.
- ◆ Volunteer with local organizations.
- ◆ Join a support group if navigating grief due to the loss of a loved one.

If your concerns of social isolation and loneliness persist, it is important to talk to your healthcare provider if you think you have depression.

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Snacks:

A Diet Hazard or Help?

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Are snacks good or bad for you? A snack is generally defined as any food eaten between main meals. The most common reason for snacking is that our stomachs start growling a few hours after our last meal. Our energy levels may create the need to eat. Maybe the thought of snack foods may take over your mind. Or just looking forward to the taste of certain snack foods.

According to market research in the U.S., the most common snack choices are fruit, cookies, chips, ice cream, candy, popcorn, soft drinks, crackers, cake, milk, nuts and seeds, tea, and yogurt. Snacks have been associated with both weight gain and maintaining weight, as well as lower or higher diet quality. Although snacks can be a regular and important part of a healthy diet, they can also lead to health problems. A person's snacking behavior differentiates between hazard or help: what type of food you snack on, why you snack, how often you snack and how snacks fit into your overall eating plan.

Research has found various motivations for snacking: hunger, social/food culture, distracted eating, boredom, indulgence, and food insecurity. Along with the actual snacks in our daily food intake, marketing may also play a role. The food and beverage industry spends almost \$14 billion per year on advertising in the US. The bulk of which, more than 80%, promotes fast food, sugary drinks, candy, and other unhealthy snacks. Some studies found that snacking not caused by hunger was associated with a higher overall calorie intake. Emotional eaters and those under psychological stress have been found to eat more energy-dense snacks, especially those higher in sugar and fat.

The 2020 Food & Health Survey from the International Food Information Council revealed several insights into how Americans snack. About a quarter of Americans surveyed said they snacked multiple times a day, and one-third snacked at least once daily. The most popular reasons for snacking were hunger or thirst, or wanting a sweet or salty treat, as snack foods were easily available. Forty percent said they at least occasionally replaced meals with snacks (lunch being the meal most often replaced) and 25% sometimes skipped meals entirely.

In children, snacking makes up about 27% of their daily calorie intake and there has been a substantial increase in snacking habits over the past few decades. American children tend to consume snacks that are calorie-rich and nutrient-poor, which is concerning when more than 30% of children and adolescents are overweight or obese.

Data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey show that children do not obtain enough calcium, vitamin D, fiber, or potassium, but have high intakes of calories, carbohydrates, and sodium. Snacks such as low-sugar yogurt, fresh fruit, raw vegetables, and nuts can help provide these needed nutrients in young children and preadolescents while controlling excess calories. Taking small steps to choose foods low in fat, salt and added sugar helps individuals and families make sure snacks chosen are healthy and are a positive addition to a healthy diet.

VISIONS

is a peer reviewed newsletter published four times yearly and sent upon request, without charge.

Published by
Rutgers Cooperative Extension
Department of Family & Community Health Sciences

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Desktop publishing by: **Arly Ditio Graphics**

Printed December 2025



Urban Gardening

for Food Security and Community Connection

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In Essex County, New Jersey, 11.6% of residents, or about 99,201 people, experience food insecurity. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as having “uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods.” Beyond hunger, food insecurity is linked to stress, poor nutrition, and long-term health conditions such as obesity and diabetes.

In communities where access to fresh and nutritious food is limited, urban gardening offers a promising solution. It not only improves food access but also provides educational opportunities for people of all ages. Urban gardening offers a multitude of environmental and health benefits. It can improve air and water quality, increase biodiversity, reduce the urban heat island effect, and strengthen food security. Green spaces in diverse communities can offer residents a safe and welcoming environment to connect with nature and benefit from the products of their labor.

Launched in the Spring of 2025, the Hope Village Garden Club was created to help address food security and foster community engagement. Over the course of seven weeks, participants received hands-on instruction in a newly constructed greenhouse at Hope Village II, a bridge housing community in Newark, NJ. The program focused on urban gardening and nutritional education and included food demonstrations and fresh produce giveaways.

Participants learned how to grow their own food, gained insights into healthy eating, and explored the importance of agriculture and sustainability. After completing the program, many participants shared how much they appreciated learning about agriculture and nutrition. Some planned to start their own home gardens, while others highlighted the joy of meeting new people and building a sense of community.

The following highlights some of the key benefits associated with urban gardening:

Social Benefits of Urban Gardening:

- ✓ **Connect with Nature:** Growing food fosters a sense of gratitude and environmental stewardship.
- ✓ **Community Building:** Community gardening brings together people from diverse backgrounds, promotes inclusion and fosters belonging
- ✓ **Neighborhood Safety:** Studies have found that green spaces positively affect neighborhood safety, potentially reducing crime rates

Health Benefits of Urban Gardening:

- ✓ **Mental Health:** Being outdoors surrounded by plants and nature plays a positive role in mental health and improves mood.
- ✓ **Physical Health:** Gardening promotes physical activity and may lower stress and risk of chronic diseases like heart disease.
- ✓ **Nutrition:** Direct access to fresh fruits and vegetables encourages healthier dietary choices.
- ✓ **Vitamin D:** Spending time outdoors can increase vitamin D levels, which is important for bone and immune health.



We all have a role to play in addressing food insecurity. This can be as simple as growing some vegetables at home that can be shared with neighbors or friends, joining or starting a local community garden club, or volunteering with a local food bank or pantry. These small acts help nourish our communities and allow us to reap the physical, mental, and social benefits of gardening while strengthening local food access.

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- <https://njaes.rutgers.edu/FS1366/>



Biofilms:

What Are They and Why Do They Matter?

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Have you ever noticed a slimy film in your sink drain? That's more than just dirt... it's a community of microbes called a biofilm. Biofilms can be thick or thin and can be sticky or slimy. Bacteria and other microbes start by attaching to a surface where food and water are readily available. As the bacteria grow, they can build up a slimy shield that helps to protect them from being washed away. Biofilms can be hard to remove with just soap and water, or even with a disinfectant like chlorine. They can quietly linger and become a hidden source of contamination.



Biofilms can form and thrive in nature (imagine a slimy rock in a stream - that's probably a biofilm). Biofilms can also form in our homes, as well as grocery stores and restaurants. Old sponges and dishcloths can harbor biofilms and spread bacteria to dishes and counters. Sink drains and garbage disposals can be hotspots for biofilm formation. Old cutting boards with deep knife grooves trap food and moisture providing a perfect location for biofilms to form. Moisture and food residues in refrigerator drawers on shelves also provide a surface for biofilm formation.



Pathogenic bacteria such as Salmonella and Listeria use biofilms as safehouses, shielding them from cleaning and disinfectants. These bacteria are more resistant to heat, chemicals, and drying out when biofilm forms, surviving better and longer. A Listeria monocytogenes outbreak linked to a Boar's Head meat plant led to 59 illnesses, 60 hospitalizations, and 10 deaths in 2024. Contaminated frozen shakes were recently linked to another Listeria monocytogenes outbreak that sickened 38 people sick across 21 states, sending almost everyone to the hospital and leading to 12 deaths. It's likely that biofilms contributed to the causes of both outbreaks.

Simple ways to control biofilms in our kitchens, grocery stores, restaurants, and food manufacturing plants include properly cleaning surfaces with hot, soapy water after use. Sanitizing clean surfaces with appropriate sanitizing chemicals is an important means to controlling biofilms. Some simple tips you can follow in your own kitchen include discarding kitchen sponges when they become smelly or discolored. Useful life of a sponge can be extended by washing them in your dishwasher, especially if it has a sanitizing cycle. An alternative to using the dishwasher is to place the sponge in a shallow dish of water and microwaving until the water gets close to boiling. Be sure to handle hot dishes carefully and make sure the sponge is covered in water as microwaving a dry sponge can lead to fires. Regularly cleaning damp spots like sink drains and refrigerator drawers will help remove slimy buildup. Use one cutting board for raw meat and a separate one for other foods. Be sure to discard cutting boards that have deep cuts after extensive use.

Biofilms can be stubborn, but they aren't unbeatable. With simple habits like cleaning and sanitizing dirty surfaces along with replacing sponges and cutting board when needed, we can fight biofilms in our homes and help keep our meals safe. Food safety can start in our own kitchens and each small step we take adds up to healthier families and peace of mind at the table.

For More Information on Biofilms and Food Safety

1. **Food Poisoning News** - *The role of dangerous biofilms in foodborne pathogen survival.* <https://www.foodpoisoningnews.com/the-role-of-dangerous-biofilms-in-foodborne-pathogen-survival/>
2. **FoodSafety.com** - *Identification of Biofilm-Forming Foodborne Pathogens & Prevention Strategies.* <https://www.food-safety.com/articles/9256-identification-of-biofilm-forming-foodborne-pathogens-and-development-of-prevention-strategies>
3. **Research Outreach** - *Bacterial biofilms: A persisting public health challenge.* <https://researchoutreach.org/articles/bacterial-biofilms-persisting-public-health-challenge/>



What are the signs and symptoms of depression?

- ◆ Persistent sad, anxious, or “empty” mood
- ◆ Feelings of hopelessness, guilt, worthlessness, or helplessness
- ◆ Irritability, restlessness, or having trouble sitting still
- ◆ Loss of interest in once pleasurable activities, including sex
- ◆ Decreased energy or fatigue
- ◆ Moving or talking more slowly
- ◆ Difficulty concentrating, remembering, or making decisions
- ◆ Difficulty sleeping, waking up too early in the morning, or oversleeping
- ◆ Eating more or less than usual, usually with unplanned weight gain or loss
- ◆ Thoughts of death or suicide

Don't ignore the warning signs, especially if one or more last for more than two weeks. If left untreated, serious depression may lead to death by suicide.

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- National Institute on Aging. (2021). Loneliness and Social Isolation — Tips for Staying Connected. National Institute on Aging. <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/loneliness-and-social-isolation/loneliness-and-social-isolation-tips-staying-connected>
 - Malani, P. (2023, March 13). Trends in Loneliness Among Older Adults from 2018-2023 | National Poll on Healthy Aging. www.healthyagingpoll.org. <https://www.healthyagingpoll.org/reports-more/report/trends-loneliness-among-older-adults-2018-2023>
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- (Credit given to Victoria Ruvkun on [NIA Web Page](#))

Contact someone if you need help.

If you are thinking about harming yourself, call 911 or go to a hospital emergency room to get immediate help. Call the 24-hour **988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline** at **988 or 800-273-TALK (800-273-8255)**. For TTY, use your preferred **relay service or dial 711 and then 988**.

Fill Your Home With Natural Aroma Using Simmer Pots

Jennifer Korneski, MPH, FCHS Healthy Living Program Coordinator, Somerset County

A simmer pot is a stove top potpourri that will fill your home with a wonderful, natural aroma using seasonal herbs, spices and fruits. You can enjoy simmer pots year-round and use them instead of burning candles, which depending on the chemical fragrance or dyes, can trigger headaches in some people with synthetic fragrance sensitivities.

Cinnamon is a popular scent of fall and winter months. Studies have shown that the scent of cinnamon can evoke a feeling of warmth and comfort. Essential oils from herbs like lavender can promote relaxation and the scent of citrus can boost mood. Aromatherapy can impact mood by sending signals from the olfactory system to the limbic system of the brain, influencing emotions, memories, and even hormone levels having a positive effect on overall health.

Simmer pots are an easy way to use natural ingredients from the pantry and garden. Try these winter blend recipes or create your own with your favorite scent combination.

References:

- Fung T, Lau B, Ngai S, Tsang H. (2021). Therapeutic Effect and Mechanisms of Essential Oils in Mood Disorders: Interaction between the Nervous and Respiratory Systems. *National Institutes of Health*. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8125361/>

Winter Simmer Pot Blends

Holiday Spice
1 orange, sliced
2 cinnamon sticks
½ cup fresh cranberries
Bunch of fresh rosemary
1 TBSP whole cloves/all spice

Citrus Pine

1 lemon, sliced
1 orange, sliced
Few pieces of fresh pine
Few springs of rosemary
1 TBSP star anise or whole cloves

Place all ingredients in an uncovered pot of water and simmer, adding more water as needed to be sure the ingredients don't burn. The residue from certain botanicals can leave resin in pots so having a designated “simmer pot” pot may be a good idea (can get at a secondhand store). Make sure this pot is only used as your simmer pot as some ingredients may contaminate the simmer pot and should not be used for food.

Simmer pot bags also make a unique and simple DIY gift for the holidays. Just fill a clear cello bag with herbs, spices and a whole citrus fruit and wrap with a decorative ribbon and personalized tag.



Beware of Fraud:

Red Flags, Decision Rules, and Fraud Prevention Tips

Dr. Barbara O'Neill, CFP®, Distinguished Professor and Financial Management Specialist Emeritus, Rutgers Cooperative Extension



While March is widely recognized as Fraud Prevention Month, fraud is addressed year-round through ongoing efforts by law enforcement and consumer protection agencies. In addition, consumers can never let their guard down! This article addresses three important “need to knows:” red flags, decision rules, and fraud prevention tips.



Red Flags

- ◆ **Future Predictions** - Beware of marketers that guarantee an investment's future return. With the exception of bonds, investment returns are unpredictable and the value of securities rises and falls with market trends.
- ◆ **Quick Cash** - Scam artists often promise fast, low-risk payoffs and compare their returns to low rates on bank accounts or bonds. Their implication is that victims are “suckers” for settling for low returns.
- ◆ **Obscure Origins** - Background information about the history and physical location of a fraudulent entity is misleading or not provided because marketers do not want consumers to be able to check out their claims.
- ◆ **Immediate Response** - Urgency (requiring an immediate response or payment) is important to swindlers so they get victims' money fast before victims have time to become suspicious or contact others for advice.
- ◆ **Recovery Attempts** - Fraud victims' names are widely circulated by swindlers. If consumers have fallen prey to a previous scam, they could get a call promising to recover money that they already lost.

Decision Rules

Decision rules are personal guidelines or criteria used to make quick, consistent choices. Consider the following:

- ◆ I will not answer the phone if I do not know who is calling. I'll let it go to voice mail and block the number.
- ◆ If someone cold calls to “verify my identity” or “authenticate my account,” I will hang up.
- ◆ I will ignore unsolicited requests for money, prizes, Social Security numbers, account numbers, or urgent help.
- ◆ I will only use official contact channels (phone numbers, websites, emails) to verify an entity's legitimacy.
- ◆ I will not click on suspicious unknown links or download unexpected email attachments.
- ◆ I will not purchase gift cards or wire money for payments. Instead, I will stop, think, and go home.

Fraud Prevention Tips

Decision rules are personal guidelines or criteria used to make quick, consistent choices. Consider the following:

- ◆ If something sounds fishy, walk away, hang up and block, or delete. Don't engage with fraudsters.
- ◆ Monitor bank and credit card statements regularly to quickly identify suspicious activity.
- ◆ Use multifactor authentication (e.g., texted codes) on bank, investment, email, and shopping accounts.
- ◆ Enable account alerts (e.g., text messages or emails) to detect unusual financial activity quickly.
- ◆ Freeze your credit to prevent fraudsters from opening new credit accounts in your name.

In summary, scams can happen to anybody regardless of age, income, or educational level. Nobody is immune. Take proactive steps to avoid becoming a victim. Watch out for red flags, follow decision rules, and stay safe.



Behavior Change is a Gradual Process

Dr. Barbara O'Neill, CFP®, *Distinguished Professor and Financial Management Specialist Emeritus, Rutgers Cooperative Extension*

According to a leading [theory](#), personal behavior change takes place in defined stages over a period of time. Called the Transtheoretical Model of Change (TTM), it has been applied to a variety of behaviors including weight control, addictions (e.g., quitting smoking), and financial practices (e.g., saving money and reduced spending).

The TTM includes the following five stages of change:

- ✓ **Pre-contemplation** - Where people may not even be aware that a problem (e.g., high debt load) exists or that a change should be made in their life and they have no intention of making a change.
- ✓ **Contemplation** - Where people become aware that a problem exists and start thinking about making a change within six months and about alternative positive behaviors (e.g., reduce spending).
- ✓ **Preparation** - Where people commit to making a change within 30 days and gain required knowledge or skills to prepare for their planned changes (e.g., taking a course in personal finance).
- ✓ **Action** - Where people "take the plunge" and actually change their behavior (e.g., following a budget and accelerating debt repayment) to address the problem that they identified.
- ✓ **Maintenance** - Where people work to sustain their change, reap the rewards of their efforts (e.g., increased bank account balance) and maintain a changed behavior for at least six months.

The TTM also defines several major processes of change that relate to one or more of the behavioral change steps:

- ✓ **Consciousness** - raising (raised awareness) occurs in the pre-contemplation and contemplation stages. An example is a news story about the benefits of saving small dollar amounts on a regular basis that might "plant the seed" that regular savings grows substantially over time and cause a person to think, "I should save some money" and.
- ✓ **Emotional arousal** is an emotional response related to a behavior change that is experienced on a deep, personal level. Dramatic stories of how people's lives have changed may encourage others to make changes themselves. Examples: stories about lung cancer and smoking or people without savings struggling to live in retirement.
- ✓ **Self-reevaluation** is a change process where people thoughtfully assess a problem and what could happen if they address it. In other words, imagining how your life could be better if you changed your behavior. For example, "If I start saving for retirement, I won't have to work until I am 80."
- ✓ **Commitment** takes place during the preparation stage of change. Here people acknowledge that "if it is to be, it's up to me." An example of commitment is "I will save \$100 per paycheck in a 401(k) retirement savings plan."
- ✓ **Countering** is a change process that occurs at the action stage of change. It involves substituting a healthy response (e.g., saving \$3 per day) for an unhealthy one (e.g., spending \$3 on lottery tickets).
- ✓ **Environmental control** is another action stage change process. It involves restructuring your environment to reduce the probability of a problem-causing event. An example is signing up for direct deposit into a retirement savings account so money can be invested before it is spent.

Personal change is hard, and it does not happen just because we want it to. Most successful changes require persistence, positive thoughts, and a support system. Are you ready to make changes in your health habits, interpersonal relationships, or finances? Additional information about the TTM can be found in the book *Changing for Good* by Prochaska, Norcross, and DiClemente.



