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Research Team Looking for Connection Between Isolation, Mental Illness in Older Adults

LITTLE ROCK — A group of researchers at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) has launched a pilot project to study a possible link between social seclusion and mental illness in older adults.

The social response to the COVID-19 pandemic brought about isolation the likes of which have never been seen before, particularly for older adults, according to Tatiana Wolfe, Ph.D., a medical imaging physicist with the UAMS Brain Imaging Research Center. A lack of quality social interaction can lead to reduced anatomy and function of the brain and, in some cases, cause an individual to consider suicide, said Wolfe.

“For some people, that can become a critical mental health turning point,” she added, pointing to the extensive increase in cases of dementia, depression and anxiety that occurred during the pandemic due to social disconnection.

Wolfe’s LIFEbrain Project is currently recruiting subjects between the ages of 60 and 90 years of age to take part in a brain imaging study relating social disconnection and the health risk factors it can have for older adults. A total of 70 adults with varying degrees of social connectivity will be involved in the study, which will be conducted in two phases.

The first phase will involve participants answering a series of questions and completing simple tasks to measure their cognitive ability. The second phase will consist of participants answering the same questions and performing the same tasks while undergoing a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), a noninvasive technique for mapping brain structure and function.

Subjects will be compensated \$50 for completing the first phase or \$100 for completing both phases. They will also receive vouchers to cover lunch and parking.

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“A unique aspect of the LIFEbrain project is that we are studying what makes the brain of senior adults sustain or lose health while under social distress,” said Wolfe, who hopes the study will help science gain a better understanding of the effects of social disconnection on seniors, and identify strategies to prevent associated health risk behaviors.

“We’re trying to identify the aspects of the brain that are affected by real or perceived social disconnection, and how and why that disconnection associates with mental health problems later in life,” she said. “Hopefully this work will lead to greater understanding of the causes of mental health risks as we age, and point to more effective therapies.”

For more information about the LIFEbrain Project, call (501) 420-2653.

UAMS is the state's only health sciences university, with colleges of Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, Health Professions and Public Health; a graduate school; a hospital; a main campus in Little Rock; a Northwest Arkansas regional campus in Fayetteville; a statewide network of regional campuses; and seven institutes: the Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute, Jackson T. Stephens Spine & Neurosciences Institute, Harvey & Bernice Jones Eye Institute, Psychiatric Research Institute, Donald W. Reynolds Institute on Aging, Translational Research Institute and Institute for Digital Health & Innovation. UAMS includes UAMS Health, a statewide health system that encompasses all of UAMS' clinical enterprise. UAMS is the only adult Level 1 trauma center in the state. UAMS has 3,240 students, 913 medical residents and fellows, and five dental residents. It is the state's largest public employer with more than 11,000 employees, including 1,200 physicians who provide care to patients at UAMS, its regional campuses, Arkansas Children's, the VA Medical Center and Baptist Health. Visit www.uams.edu or www.uamshealth.com. Find us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [YouTube](#) or [Instagram](#).

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