

A Fear of Dying Alone



Fears as an increasing population face old age alone

→ New research from Dignity in Dying has revealed that Britain's greatest fear about death is dying alone.

However, progressive changes in society and in the way we live will mean that many more people will unfortunately one day face their biggest fear.

This report will provide a unique new analysis on the effect that an increasing amount of elderly people living alone will have on their deaths and how we need to adapt end-of-life care services to meet the ever-changing needs of society.

→ A recent report by WRVS, entitled Home Alone¹, predicted that by 2021, the population of elderly people living alone will have increased by as much as a third.

The report, which looked at how social isolation in later life was becoming increasingly common, provided an in-depth analysis of the factors that are leading to this. Many people already die alone, without any support from family or friends and sometimes- as is frequently reported in the media- even die unnoticed. Society faces the challenge of an increasing number of such deaths taking place as more and more people face living the end of their lives alone.

Dignity in Dying has combined the WRVS study with its own and other existing research to identify key trends connecting living alone with dying alone, and addressing the public's fears about the end of their lives, in order to determine how we can accommodate an increasing amount of people who will face the end of their lives without any immediate family support and who would otherwise face dying alone.

→ Dignity in Dying found that being alone is the UK's greatest fear about dying:

Respondents to Dignity in Dying's YouGov survey stated being alone as their greatest fear about dying- ahead of lack of adequate pain control

Perhaps due to the knowledge that an increasing amount of people will end up living alone, dying alone is the UK's biggest fear about death. This emphasised the high importance of companionship and therefore the significance of having to go through the dying process alone.

- Childlessness or children living far away
- Divorce or separation
- Living alone
- Having or developing a physical or mental impairment
- Living in a rural area
- Having a small and homogenous social network

- One third of the population stated being alone as their greatest fear about dying
- A fifth of the population stated lack of adequate pain relief as their greatest fear about dying
- Not having treatment wishes respected was also a top fear about dying, with a tenth of the population stating this
- Not being able to die in a place of their choice was another commonly stated fear about dying

→The WRVS found that the following factors pose a risk of isolation in later life

The amount of people demonstrating these factors is increasing and becoming the norm

→ The problems this causes are already apparent:

- The average amount of children per family has decreased from 2.9% in 1975 to 2.3% in 2000²
- The average child-bearing age has increased from 26 in 1950 to 30 in 2000³
- “There has been a significant decline in the number of marriages and also a considerable increase in the number of divorces⁴
- Mental illness is increasing. One in four people will experience mental illness in their lifetimes⁵

→ And living alone in old age is already commonplace:

- 29% of men and 60% of women over 75 live alone⁶
- More than one million people over 50 feel they are “socially excluded” from society⁷

→ Many people are already dying alone as a result:

- 60 people per week die alone without the support of family and friends⁸
- At least two decomposing bodies are found every week in London and up to ten per month in other UK cities⁹

→ Consequently, each region displayed different levels of fears about dying.

Wales was the only region for which dying alone was not the top fear concerning death. The South East on the other hand, showed the greatest fear of dying alone. Regions stating dying alone as their top fear tended to be those with larger populations of people living alone, suggesting that those already living alone have already formed some level of acceptance that they may also die alone.

→ The amount of people living alone differs throughout regions:

15% of the UK population live alone, but this varies dramatically between regions

The highest proportions of people living alone:

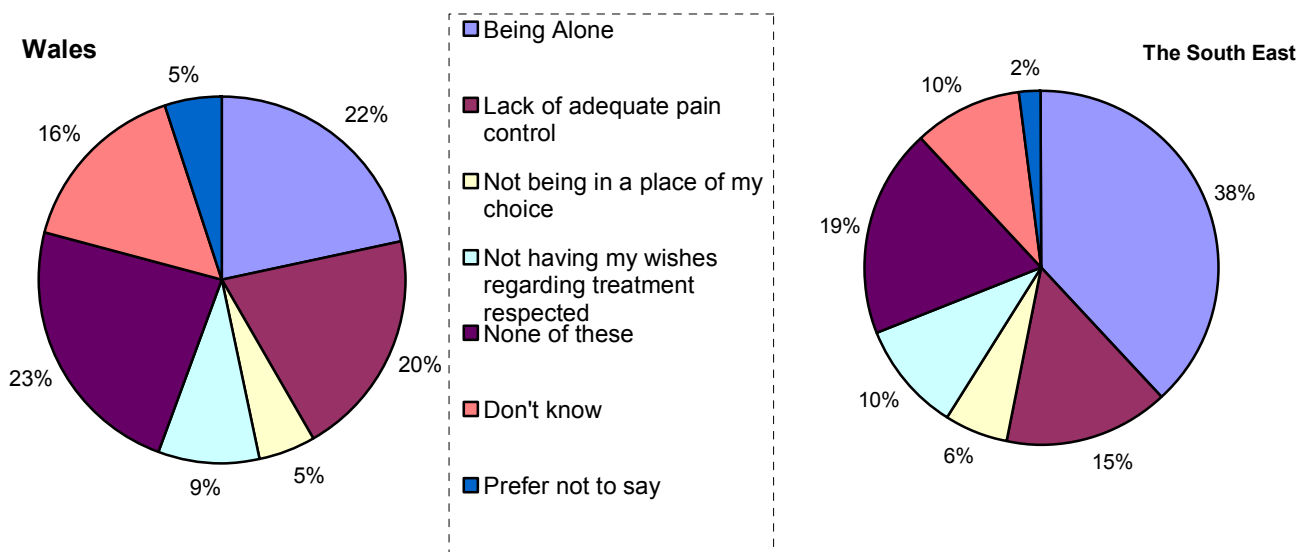
- Wales - almost a quarter of Welsh people live alone, the highest proportion in the whole of the UK and well above the national average
- The South West of England and Northern Ireland - 22% of people in these regions live alone, again well above the national average
- Scotland and the Midlands - The joint third highest proportion of people living alone, standing at 16%

The lowest proportions of people living alone:

- Yorkshire and The Humber - this region had the lowest proportion of people living alone, with just 10%, well below the national average
- The North West - Just 11% of the population in the North West live alone
- The North East - Again, another northern region showing a below average proportion of people living alone, at 12%

- People in Scotland are more concerned about treatment wishes than any other regions, with 12% stating this as their greatest fear about dying
- In Wales, people are less scared of dying alone than any other region, with just 22% stating this as their greatest fear
- People in the East of England are more concerned about not being able to die in a place of their choice than any other region
- People in the East are also more concerned about not having adequate pain control in dying than any other region
- London has the lowest concern about treatment wishes not being respected
- People in the South East are the most fearful of dying alone

Pie charts showing regional differences in fears between Wales, who fear dying alone the least, and the South East, who fear dying alone the most:



→ Evidence shows that living alone already creates problems in dying:

People are forgotten about

There have been many cases reported in the media of people who have been ‘forgotten about’ due to living in social isolation. These people have died alone and this has often gone unnoticed for several months before their bodies are discovered. The number of reported cases in the media represents only a fraction of similar deaths that are taking place.

- 60 people per week die alone without the support of family and friends¹¹
- At least two decomposing bodies are found every week in London and up to ten per month in other UK cities¹²
- Between 2000 and 2004, a survey of 182 councils found that 11,004 municipal funerals took place, suggesting the figure for all 266 councils was 16,083

→ Fears about dying changed across different groups of people:

- People living alone were more scared of not having their treatment wishes respected when dying than those living with family
- Younger people (aged 18-25) fear dying alone more than older people (aged over 55)
- Fear of pain during dying decreased with age
- The importance of place of death increased with age
- The importance of having treatment wishes respected increased with age
- Women are more scared of dying alone than men
- Women are also more scared of not having adequate pain control than men
- C2DEs were more afraid of dying alone than ABC1s
- ABC1s were more afraid of adequate pain control than C2DEs

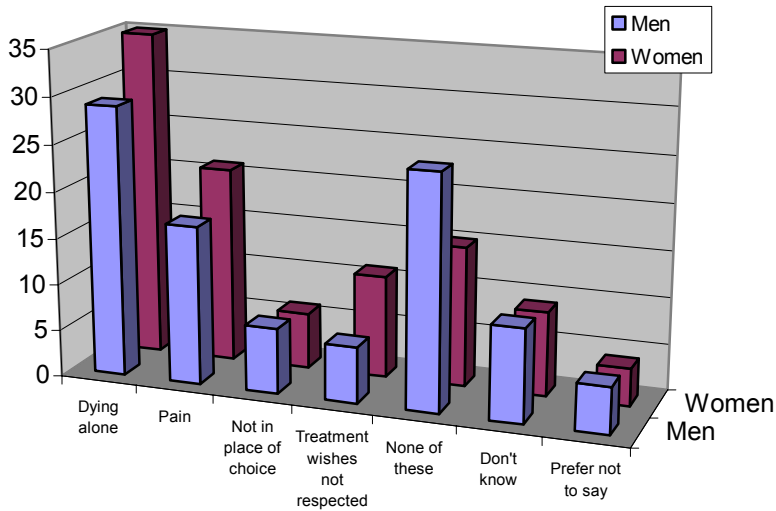


Chart showing the differences in fears about dying between men and women and between different social groups

Chart showing the differences in fears about dying between age groups:

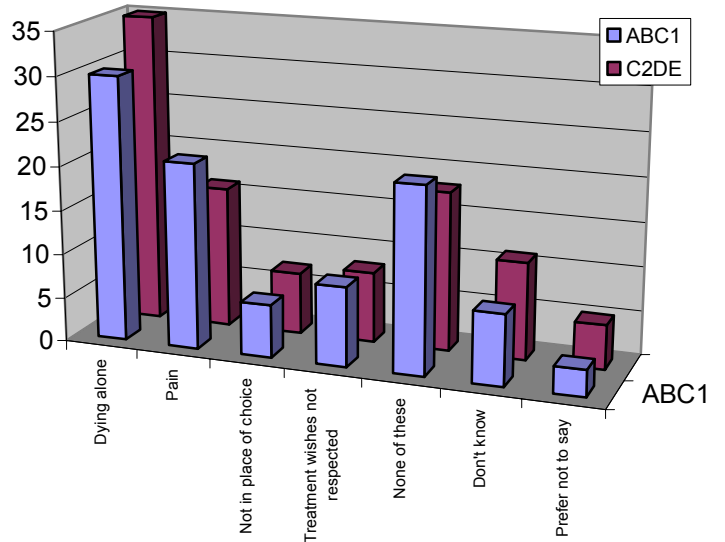
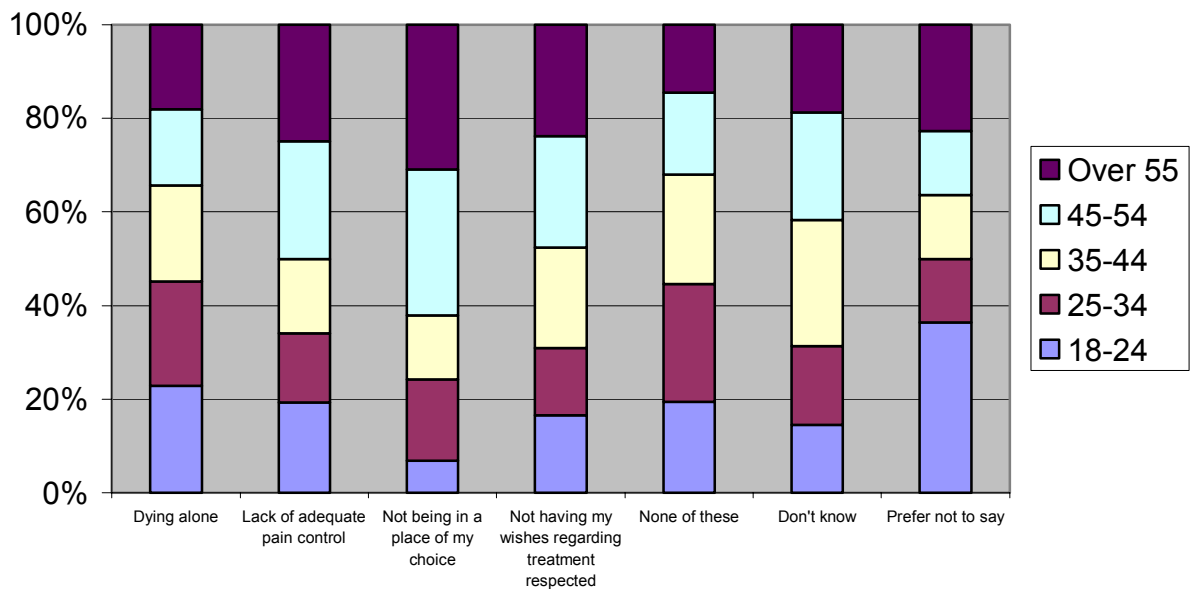


Chart showing the different fears about dying between age groups:



→ Conclusion

It is apparent from the WRVS study, Home Alone, that there are many factors contributing to social isolation at the end of life. People living alone in old age may not have access to the same choices that those with family may have. It is also apparent, from the Dignity in Dying research, Dying Alone, that fear of dying differs amongst different groups of people and obviously stems from a variety of different reasons and circumstances. This leads to the conclusion that extra provisions must be available for those who live alone, in order to ensure that they have maximum choice at the end of life. Care of the dying needs to be flexible, adaptable and personalised.

→ Dignity in Dying wants increased support for elderly people who are living alone and who are fearful of dying, based on the following principles:

- Health and social care staff should have the necessary knowledge and skills to ensure people make fully informed choices regarding care at the end of their lives, by providing simple and accessible information
- People must have the option of having a personalised end-of-life care plan and/or advance decision in order to communicate their preferences for treatment and care
- Integrated health and social care services, based on individual needs and preferences, should be available in order to ensure continuity of care

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Notes:

Unless mentioned otherwise, all data is from: YouGov (2008) for Dignity in Dying, 'Dying Alone',

Endnotes:

- 1 WRVS: Home Alone (2004)
- 2 General Household Survey: results for 2005
- 3 (GHS), National Statistics, Crown Copyright 2006, table 3.4 (Percentage of men and women living alone by age).
- 4 www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_compensa/GHS05/GeneralHouseholdSurvey2005.pdf
- 5 Silverman Sherliker (2007)
- 5 National Statistics
- 6 Age Concern (2008)
- 7 National Statistics (2005)
- 8 Dying Alone: Assessing isolation, loneliness and poverty (Paul Burstow, 2005)
- 9 Big Issue (1999)
- 10 DWP (October 2007)
- 11 Dying Alone: Assessing isolation, loneliness and poverty (Paul Burstow, 2005)
- 12 Big Issue (1999)
- 13 Dying Alone: Assessing isolation, loneliness and poverty (Paul Burstow, 2005)

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