Evidence for digital interventions to reduce social isolation and loneliness in older adults is unevenly distributed and of critically low quality

What is this evidence and gap map (EGM) about?
Social isolation and loneliness are common in older adults and have been highlighted during the Covid-19 pandemic. Social isolation and loneliness pose a significant concern because of their impact on older adults' well-being, mental health, physical health and longevity.

Older adults can use digital interventions to maintain existing connections or develop new connections. This was especially evident during the Covid-19 pandemic, with social distancing and lockdown measures in place. Decisionmakers need to know which digital interventions can reduce social isolation and loneliness in older adults.

What studies are included?
The EGM includes 200 articles (97 systematic reviews and 103 primary studies) that assessed how digital interventions can reduce social isolation and loneliness in older adults. The studies had to report the effect of digital interventions and could come from any region.

What are the main findings of this EGM?
The evidence is unevenly distributed geographically, with most from high-income countries and none from low-income countries. Over 70% of the systematic reviews have critically low quality and 25% have been published since the pandemic began.

The most common interventions are digital interventions to enhance social interactions with family, friends and the community via videoconferencing and telephone calls. Digital interventions to enhance social support, particularly socially assistive robots and virtual pets, were also common.

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Most interventions focus on reducing loneliness and depression and improving quality of life of older adults.

Community level outcomes and process indicators are hardly reported, and no included studies or reviews assess affordability or lack of accessibility, although the value of accessibility and barriers caused by lack of accessibility were discussed in three studies and three reviews. Adverse effects are reported in very few studies and reviews.

Participants from the LGBTQIA2S+ community are not included in any study or review and only one study restricted participants to 80 years and older. Very few studies or reviews describe how at-risk populations were recruited or conduct any equity analysis to assess differential effects for populations experiencing inequities across PROGRESS-Plus factors.

What do the findings of this EGM mean?

This map is the first step towards identifying which digital interventions are effective for reducing social isolation and loneliness in older adults. The EGM contributes to the longer-term aim of building an evidence architecture for the field, whereby the use of evidence becomes institutionalised in policy and practice.

Although the evidence is relatively large and recent, it is unevenly distributed and there is need for more high-quality research. This map can guide researchers and funders to consider areas of major gaps as priorities for further research.