Loneliness ‘can increase risk of stroke’

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LONG-TERM loneliness may increase the risk of stroke by 56%, according to a new study.
Researchers from Harvard University in the US found that chronic loneliness could have a big impact on people as they age.
Those who experienced situational loneliness rather than suffering long term did not have an increased risk of stroke – suggesting that the impact of loneliness on stroke occurs over the longer term.
Lead author Dr Yenee Soh said: “Loneliness is increasingly considered a major public health issue. Our findings further highlight why that is. Especially when experienced chronically, our study suggests loneliness may play an important role in stroke incidence, which is already one of the leading causes of long-term disability and mortality worldwide.”
The study, published in eClinicalMedicine, used data from 2006 to 2018 from the University of Michigan’s Health and Retirement Study. Some 12,161 people aged 50 and over who had never had a stroke were asked questions about loneliness between 2006 and 2008.
Four years later, 8,936 people who remained in the study responded to the same questions and researchers then grouped the people depending on their answers across the two time points.
Among the people who provided two assessments of loneliness over time, 601 strokes occurred between 2010-2018.
Of those whose loneliness was measured at start of the study only, 1,237 strokes happened.
After controlling for factors such as social isolation and depressive symptoms, which are closely related to loneliness but distinct, researchers found that people considered lonely at the start of the study had a 25% higher risk of stroke than those not considered lonely.
Among those who scored “consistently high” for loneliness at both time points, there was a 56% higher risk of stroke than those in the “consistently low” group. Dr Soh said: “Repeat assessments of loneliness may help identify those who are chronically lonely and are therefore at a higher risk for stroke.
“If we fail to address their feelings of loneliness, on a micro and macro scale, there could be profound health consequences.”
Dr Soh said people should be offered help based on their loneliness – which relates to how people feel even if surrounded by others – and not social isolation, which is different.