Imagine you are a zookeeper and it’s your job to design an enclosure for humans. What single feature would best ensure the health and well-being of the animals in your care? Appropriate access to food and water? Shelter?

The thought experiment has only one answer, according to social neuroscientist John Cacioppo who proposed it. The enclosure, above all else, must take into account our need for connection with other humans. We are an “obligatorily gregarious species”, in Cacioppo’s words. Yet if so, this is not how many of us live today. We are often far from our families, in homes where we are the sole occupant, socialising, working and shopping online.

This can have a serious downside: a gnawing feeling of loneliness to which most of us can be prone, regardless of age or stage of life. We’re just beginning to understand what serious consequences that can have. Loneliness changes the brain, taking hold of our thoughts and behaviours in ways that are likely to make us feel even more isolated. But its effects are not just psychological; they are also physical. Left unchecked, loneliness can have a physiological impact as detrimental to longevity as smoking or obesity.

“I’d always thought of loneliness as a nuisance, not one of the most toxic environmental conditions we can possibly encounter,” says Steve Cole at the University of California, Los Angeles, who studies the effect of the environment on our genes. If that sounds gloomy, the new insights also offer perspectives on how to tackle this notoriously intractable social phenomenon – and make each of us less lonely, too.

Loneliness is often assumed to be a problem of social isolation, one that predominantly affects the elderly, or vulnerable people with no friends and family who rarely leave home. Perhaps the most well reported statistic is that nearly half of people aged 65 and over say the television is their main source of company.

Yet loneliness may have very little to do with being on our own, or having few friends, even if this is how it is often defined. “It’s not social isolation; it’s feeling socially isolated,” says Cacioppo of the University of Chicago, who has spent 25 years studying the subject.

Loneliness arises from a mismatch between expectations of our social interactions and the reality. A lonely person will not feel less so simply by being surrounded by other individuals. Similarly, a socially enfranchised person won’t feel lonely just because they have spent some time alone.

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Lonely people are at increased risk of “just about every major chronic illness – heart attacks, neurodegenerative diseases, cancer,” says Cole. “Just a completely crazy range of bad disease risks seem to all coalesce.
around loneliness.” A meta-analysis of nearly 150 studies found that a poor quality of social relationships had the same negative effect on risk of death as smoking, alcohol and other well-known factors such as inactivity and obesity. “Correcting for demographic factors, loneliness increases the odds of early mortality by 26 per cent,” says Cacioppo. “That’s about the same as living with chronic obesity.”

One apparent reason is that loneliness lowers willpower, so we are more likely to indulge in self-defeating behaviour. We may take risks and make bad decisions – from choosing unhealthy food, to avoiding exercise. Feeling socially isolated also increases the risk of mental health problems such as anxiety, stress, depression and eating disorders, all of which can have a knock-on effect on our physical health.

Screaming signal

But perhaps the biggest effect may be on the genes that control the immune system. In their first study together, Cacioppo and Cole compared gene expression in the white blood cells of two groups. In one group were six persistently lonely middle-aged adults and in the other were eight who ranked as consistently socially enfranchised. In the lonelier people, the activity of genes responsible for inflammation was ramped right up. “The signal was screaming loud – it could not have been more clear,” says Cole. Inflammation is the body’s first line of defence against injury and bacterial
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