

One in five people aged over 70 eat all their meals alone

By Izzy Lyons

A FIFTH of people over the age of 70 in the UK eat all of their main meals alone, the Royal Voluntary Service (RVS) has found as it has encouraged younger generations to create lunch clubs.

The research, which asked a sample of over-70s about their eating habits and the level of social interaction they had at mealtimes, found that, on average, people aged 70 and over eat four-and-a-half key meals alone per week.

Around a third eat half their weekly lunches and dinners with no company, the RVS's research also found.

The RVS, one of Britain's largest volunteering charities, warned that lonely dining could be having a "detrimental impact" on elderly people's health as 16 per cent of its participants said they ate less healthily when eating alone.

700,000

The number of over-70s in the UK who, according to the RVS, skip one of their main meals at least seven times each day

The voluntary service estimated that more than 700,000 of over-70s skip breakfast, lunch or dinner at least seven times each week.

The findings come as the RVS launched its Cooking for a Crowd campaign, which aims to "shine a light" on the hundreds of volunteers who run 76 lunch clubs up and down the country, serving more than 50,000 meals each year to older people in the community.

The lunch clubs offer members a regular chance to eat a hot and healthy meal in the company of others and provide opportunities to make friends, build a support system and maintain social connection, the RVS said.

William Sitwell, the MasterChef critic and award-winning food editor, praised the volunteer cooks he met when visiting one of the lunch clubs. He said: "We should all take inspiration from Royal Voluntary Service's volunteers, who give their time freely and generously and make amazing things happen in communities up and down Britain. I was really humbled by the volunteer cook I met, her fellow volunteers and the sense of community and camaraderie among the diners."

Elderly loneliness is believed to be a growing problem in the UK. Last month Age UK warned that the number of “lonely” over-50-year-olds is on course to hit two million within seven years.

Rebecca Kennelly of the RVS said: “For many older people in Britain, eating alone is an everyday occurrence.

“Support from players of People’s Postcode Lottery is helping the RVS to develop more lunch and social clubs across the country to ensure older people get to eat at least one healthy, hot meal in the company of others on a regular basis. We hope our campaign inspires more people to become members or donate their time to volunteer.

“We also want to encourage more people to take the lead in their communities by volunteering to start up their own lunch and social club so that less people have to eat alone.”