

Religious activity does not lower blood pressure: study

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(Medical Xpress) -- Contrary to some earlier studies, a Loyola University Health System study has found that religious activity does not help protect against high blood pressure.

A survey of 200 residents of Maywood, Ill., found no statistically significant association between most measures of religiosity and [lower blood pressure](#). And in one measure of religiosity -- bringing [religion](#) into other dealings in life -- people who were more religious actually had higher blood pressure.

"It's the opposite of what we expected to find," said senior author Amy Luke, PhD, an assistant professor in the Department of [Preventive Medicine](#) & Epidemiology at Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine.

The study was presented April 30, 2011, at a meeting of the Society of Teachers of Family Medicine.

Some previous studies have found that religious activity such as prayer, meditation and going to church help lower blood pressure. Some researchers have suggested that religious activity can counter factors that can boost blood pressure, such as stress, hostility, depression, hopelessness and loneliness. Also, the social support that people get from religious activities can promote better health.

But other studies have found that religiosity provides no benefit in

controlling blood pressure.

"There have been contradictory findings, so the role of religion in chronic disease needs to be further examined," said first author Laura Heinrich, a medical student at Stritch School of Medicine.

The study is among the findings from Loyola's Maywood Community Health Project. Medical students surveyed Maywood residents to assess the effects of the recent recession on their health. (Loyola University Health System's main campus is located in Maywood.)

Residents were asked if a doctor has ever told them they have high blood pressure. Residents also were asked questions about their religiosity, based on the Duke University Religion Index:

- How often do you attend church or other religious meetings?
- How often do you spend time in private religious activities, such as prayer, meditation or Bible study?
- In my life, I experience the presence of the Divine (i.e., God): True, tends to be true, unsure or not true?
- My religious beliefs are what really lie behind my whole approach to life: True, tends to be true, unsure or not true?
- I try hard to carry my religion over into all other dealings in life: True, tends to be true, unsure or not true?

Among participants who carried religion to other dealings in their lives, 35 percent said they had high blood pressure. Among those who do not carry religion to other parts of their life, 19.6 percent had high blood pressure. In the four other measures of religiosity, there were no

statistically significant associations between religiosity and high blood pressure.

All participants were African-American and their average age was 40.9. Fifty-seven percent attended church at least a few times a month and 45 percent spent time daily in private religious activities such as prayer, meditation and Bible study.

The use of the multiquestion Duke religion index is one of the main strengths of the study. Some previous studies asked about only one aspect of religiosity, such as church attendance.

A limitation of the study is how participants were recruited. Initially, participants were recruited through random neighborhood canvassing. But due to low participation, researchers asked a church to help in recruiting. It is possible that church members were more likely than other study participants to be aware they had [high blood pressure](#), possibly through church screenings.

"The study is continuing and, with additional data, we hope to further clarify any association between hypertension and spirituality," the authors wrote.

Other co-authors are David Shoham, PhD, an assistant professor in the Department of Preventive Medicine & Epidemiology; Lara Dugas, a research assistant professor in the same department; and Stritch medical students Nathan Kittle, Alicia Kurtz, Brittany Lees, Sharla Rent, Whitney Richie, Mark Stoltenberg, Stephanie Teng, Jaclyn Walsh, Michael Weaver and Maria Wusu.

"This study illustrates medical student research at its best," Luke said.

Provided by Loyola University Health System

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