

Socially active older adults have slower rates of health declines

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Staying connected to other people through a wide variety of social activities can yield important health consequences as you age.

That's the message from a new study that found that older adults who maintain high levels of social activity or ramp up their social life as they age might be protected from increases in physical and cognitive issues over time.

“People have some control over their social lives, so it is encouraging to find that something many people find enjoyable—socializing with others—can benefit their cognitive and physical [health](#),” said study author Patricia A. Thomas, Ph.D., of the Population Research Center at University of Texas at Austin.

While earlier research had established a link between health and social relations, this study sought to examine how changing social connections over time influenced health. While the elderly are vulnerable to losing formal social roles through retirement or the death of a spouse, they could still seek out social activities in other arenas.

In the study, which appears online in the December issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, the researchers analyzed data from a sample of 1,667 adults older than 60 years. Data collection from participants occurred in 1986, 1989, 1994 and 2002. Participants were asked about their frequency of social activities, such as visiting with friends and family members; attending meetings, programs or clubs; and volunteering in the community over the previous 12 months. They also answered questions about cognitive and physical limitations.

Older adults who had high initial levels of social engagement that only slightly decreased over time and those who had high or medium levels of engagement that increased over time developed cognitive and physical limitations more slowly than did those with low levels of engagement that decreased over time.

Thomas pointed out, “Even if older adults weren’t socially active when they were younger, when they increase social activity later in life, it can still reduce physical and cognitive health issues.”

Asenath La Rue, Ph.D., a neuropsychologist with the Wisconsin Alzheimer's Institute at the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, agreed with the study’s main finding. La Rue said there has not been much reporting about the benefits gained from social interaction if a person was not socially connected when younger.

“However, it’s like the chicken and egg question about which comes first,” she explained, noting that while the research was observational, epidemiology supports the fact that social interaction is beneficial for

[cognitive](#) health and physical performance in [older adults](#).

More information: Thomas, P.A. (2011) Trajectories of Social Engagement and Limitations in Late Life. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 52(4), 430-443.

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