

# In old age, lack of emotion and interest may signal your brain is shrinking

April 16 2014

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Older people who have apathy but not depression may have smaller brain volumes than those without apathy, according to a new study published in the April 16, 2014, online issue of *Neurology*, the medical journal of the American Academy of Neurology. Apathy is a lack of interest or emotion.

"Just as signs of memory loss may signal brain changes related to brain disease, [apathy](#) may indicate underlying changes," said Lenore J. Launer, PhD, with the National Institute on Aging at the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, MD, and a member of the American Academy of Neurology. "Apathy symptoms are common in [older people](#) without dementia. And the fact that participants in our study had apathy without depression should turn our attention to how apathy alone could indicate [brain disease](#)."

Launer's team used brain volume as a measure of accelerated brain aging. Brain volume losses occur during normal aging, but in this study, larger amounts of [brain volume](#) loss could indicate brain diseases.

For the study, 4,354 people without dementia and with an average age of 76 underwent an MRI scan. They were also asked questions that measure apathy symptoms, which include lack of interest, lack of emotion, dropping activities and interests, preferring to stay at home and having a lack of energy.

The study found that people with two or more apathy symptoms had 1.4

percent smaller gray matter volume and 1.6 percent less white matter volume compared to those who had less than two symptoms of apathy. Excluding people with depression symptoms did not change the results.

Gray matter is where learning takes place and memories are stored in the brain. White matter acts as the communication cables that connect different parts of the [brain](#).

"If these findings are confirmed, identifying people with apathy earlier may be one way to target an at-risk group," Launer said.

Provided by American Academy of Neurology

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