

Negative social interactions increase hypertension risk in older adults

May 28 2014

Keeping your friends close and your enemies closer may not be the best advice if you are 50 or older.

New research from Carnegie Mellon University's Rodlescia Sneed and Sheldon Cohen shows that unpleasant or demanding interpersonal encounters increase hypertension risk among older adults.

Published in the American Psychological Association's journal *Health Psychology*, the study provides some of the first concrete evidence that negative social interactions not only influence psychological well-being but also physical [health](#) – in this case, [blood pressure](#) levels.

Hypertension affects an estimated 65 million Americans and is a major contributor to cardiovascular disease, the leading cause of death in the U.S.

"This demonstrates how important social networks are as we age - constructing strong, positive relationships are beneficial to prolonged health," said Cohen, the Robert E. Doherty University Professor of Psychology in the Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

For the study, Sneed and Cohen used data from the Health and Retirement Study, a multi-year survey of 1,502 healthy adults aged 50 and over. In 2006, the frequency of negative interactions – exchanges or behaviors that involved excessive demands, criticism, disappointment or other unpleasantness – with their partners, children, other family members and friends was assessed by questionnaire. Blood pressure was

measured at this assessment as well as four years later.

The results show that each increase in the total average negative social interaction score was associated with a 38 percent increased chance of developing hypertension over the four-year period. Younger [older adults](#) – those aged 51-64 – were also more affected than those 65 or older.

The researchers also observed sex differences in their findings. While negative interactions predicted hypertension risk among women, these interactions were not related to hypertension risk among men.

"There is a body of evidence in social psychology research suggesting that women care more about and pay more attention to the quality of their relationships," said Sneed, a Ph.D. candidate in psychology. "Our findings suggest that women are particularly sensitive to [negative interactions](#), which is consistent with this previous work."

The researchers also found that the type of relationship matters. Negative interactions between friends and family led to an increase in hypertension risk while poor encounters with partners and children did not make a difference.

"Interpersonal conflicts are the most commonly reported stressor, so understanding their impact on health and well-being is particularly important," said Sneed.

Provided by Carnegie Mellon University

Citation: Negative social interactions increase hypertension risk in older adults (2014, May 28) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-05-negative-social-interactions-hypertension-older.html>

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