

Link between sleep and social participation may be key to healthy aging

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Sleep may be one of the most important factors for well-being; yet, according to the CDC, one in three adults does not get enough. Lack of sleep can lead to potential cognitive declines, chronic diseases and death. Now, research from the University of Missouri finds that older adults who have trouble sleeping, could benefit from participating in social activities, in particular attending religious events.

"Social connectedness is a key component for health and well-being for older adults," said Jen-Hao Chen, assistant professor of health sciences at the MU School of Health Professions and the Truman School of Public Affairs. "Close connections to, and participation in, social groups provides a sense of belonging and can be essential for healthy aging."

Yet despite past attention to the link between social participation and many different health outcomes, little research has been dedicated to linking social participation and another critical health outcome for older adults—sleep.

To study the relationship between sleep and social participation for older adults, Chen analyzed two waves of data collected over a five year period from the National Social Life, Health and Aging Project. He looked at three aspects of social participation; volunteering, attending religious services and being part of organized group activities. He then compared the data to sleep outcomes measured by actigraphy—wearable wrist sleep trackers. Results showed that older adults with greater levels of social participation were getting better sleep.

However, Chen says despite the strong associations between social participation and sleep, social participation does not necessarily lead to better sleep. The strong associations he found could also be due to those already sleeping well may feel well enough to be more active socially. His future research on sleep will continue to use innovative sleep measurements to understand the role various social relationships have on sleep behaviors and outcomes.

"When it comes to the discussion of healthy lifestyle, being socially connected and sleeping well are not often mentioned together," Chen said. "Yet sleep, just like physical activity and diet, can have significant impacts on our health outcomes, and is profoundly affected by our everyday social life. To promote [sleep health](#) we must consider a comprehensive approach that emphasizes the role of engaging in our communities, as well as getting enough and better [sleep](#)."

The study "Social Participation and Older Adults' Sleep" was published in the *Journal of Social Science and Medicine*.

More information: Jen-Hao Chen et al. Social participation and older adults' sleep, *Social Science & Medicine* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2015.11.045](#)

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