

Certain leisure activities may reduce post-surgical delirium among older adults

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Delirium, or the medical term for experiencing sudden confusion, is upsetting for both older adults and their families. In fact, it is one of the most common complications older adults face after surgery (a time often referred to as the "post-operative" period). Researchers believe that older adults who have higher levels of "cognitive reserve" may have a better chance for reducing their chances of developing dementia—which theoretically could reduce the risks for developing delirium.

One way to understand [cognitive reserve](#) is to think of your brain as a muscle. When you exercise a muscle, you strengthen it. Activities such as reading, playing computer games, singing, emailing and even knitting may act as "exercise" for your brain, "strengthening" it in a way that could help prevent dementia and [delirium](#). A group of researchers from Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx, NY, examined whether certain leisure activities known to reduce dementia risks could also reduce the risk of post-surgical delirium. They published their findings in the June issue of the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*.

The researchers examined a group of 142 [older adults](#) who were scheduled for elective knee, hip, or spinal surgery. They determined whether or not the people participated in leisure activities such as reading books or newspapers, knitting, emailing, playing cards or other games, working on crossword puzzles, or joining in group meetings.

Of those involved in the study, 32 percent developed post-operative

delirium. Those who were diagnosed with delirium had participated in fewer leisure activities before surgery compared with people who didn't experience delirium.

Out of all the activities, reading books, using email, and playing computer games reduced the risk of delirium. Playing computer games and singing were the only two activities that predicted lower severity of delirium.

The researchers reported that each additional day of participation in a leisure activity reduced post-operative delirium by 8 percent. According to the researchers, maintaining [leisure activities](#) later in life could be an important way to lessen the chances of developing delirium following surgery. This is important, since delirium increases an older adult's risk for functional decline, dementia, and even mortality. What's more, people with severe post-operative delirium are at greater risk for being institutionalized and for dying.

More information: Amanda Tow et al, Cognitive Reserve and Postoperative Delirium in Older Adults, *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/jgs.14130](https://doi.org/10.1111/jgs.14130)

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