

Oldest adults may have much to gain from social technology

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Researchers at the Stanford Center on Longevity find that adults over 80 benefit from using technology to connect with friends and family. Credit: DragonImages / Getty Images

Adults over 80 who use information and communication technology are

more likely to report mental and physical well-being, according to Stanford research.

"Critics say that people might not be able to connect with others as well as they used to because of the spread of new technologies," said Tamara Sims, a research scientist at the Stanford Center on Longevity. "But there really is this bright side of [technology](#), especially for older people, who may not have the opportunity to connect with many family members to the extent they want to due to physical limitations or geographical separation."

The study specifically found that adults over the age of 80 were likely to report using technology because it helps them connect with friends and family. They also found that those who reported using technology to primarily connect with loved ones reported higher [mental well-being](#). Those who said they used technology mostly to learn new information reported being more physically fit.

Sims was a lead author on the research paper, which was published in the *Journal of Gerontology: Psychological Sciences*. She conducted the study along with Andrew Reed, a former Stanford [postdoctoral fellow](#), and Dawn Carr, an assistant professor of sociology at Florida State University.

Research gap on oldest of the old

The population of people age 80 and older is the fastest growing segment in the United States, but there are relatively few scientific studies about them compared to other age groups, said Sims, a former Stanford psychology postdoctoral fellow.

"It's critical that we focus our attention on this age group because they are a ballooning demographic subgroup, but also because more and more

of us are increasingly likely to reach very old age," Sims said.

Previous studies have shown some association between [social media](#) use and better health among older adults, particularly lower levels of depression and loneliness. But most studies on the older population focus on adults over 65 years old, and that research tends to underrepresent people who are more than 80.

Sims argues it's important to distinguish between the populations who are over 65 and those who are over 80, also referred to as the "oldest-old."

"These are different life stages, and they come with their own sets of challenges," Sims said. "At 65, people are typically entering retirement, and are likely still socially engaged. For those over 80, people typically begin to face more and more health problems, which may prevent them from engaging with others as often as they would like. It's important to look at these populations separately."

Aside from narrowing their focus to adults over 80, Sims and her team also wanted to distinguish among the reasons why the oldest-old use technology and examine different aspects of their well-being: physical and mental wellness.

The study's analysis was guided by the socio-emotional selectivity theory, which suggests that as people age, they perceive time as more limited and prioritize meaningful interactions with their loved ones over learning new information or meeting new people.

The study and its results

As part of the study, researchers surveyed a nationally representative sample of 445 participants, ages between 80 and 93, online and over the

phone. The respondents were asked about their motivation for using information and [communication technology](#), the definition of which included cellphones, personal computers, video streaming services and other digital applications. The respondents were also asked how many devices they used and to rate their physical and mental well-being.

When Sims started the research, she didn't expect to find much of a correlation between technology use and well-being because adults over 80 are considered to be the most unfamiliar with these technologies and are least likely to use them.

"I was going into it a little bit skeptical," Sims said. "Part of me wondered whether the use of technology would make much of a difference for this population because pervasive stereotypes characterize this age group as technologically inept, in addition to being physically and cognitively frail."

Contrary to these stereotypes, most of the adults over 80 who were surveyed used at least one technological device regularly, and doing so was related to higher levels of self-reported physical and mental well-being. The effect on mental well-being persisted when researchers statistically controlled for physical well-being, and vice versa.

"This group is viable for intervention," Sims said. "I don't think many people are spending time thinking about it. The key here is that if you get them using these technologies, we could probably see some real benefits to quality of life in very old age."

But Sims emphasized the correlational nature of the study's results.

"We can't say that using technology will directly improve the well-being of people over age 80," Sims said. "But our findings are suggestive of a viable pathway and may help to inform longitudinal interventions."

Future studies are needed to compare the impact of in-person social interactions and those done through technology among the oldest-old. Specific effects of different types of technology, such as using a cellphone, a social media platform, or video conferencing, would also be interesting to examine, Sims said.

More information: Tamara Sims et al. Information and Communication Technology Use Is Related to Higher Well-Being Among the Oldest-Old, *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* (2016). [DOI: 10.1093/geronb/gbw130](https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/gbw130)

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