

Optimistic Latinos have healthier hearts, study finds

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Latinos who are the most optimistic are more likely to have healthy hearts, suggests a new study led by University of Illinois social work professor Rosalba Hernandez. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Latinos who are the most optimistic are more likely to have healthy

hearts, suggests a new study of more than 4,900 people of Latino/Hispanic ancestry living in the U.S.

"Each unit increase in a Latino adult's level of optimism was associated with 3 percent higher odds of meeting the criteria for ideal cardiovascular health across four or more metrics," said principal investigator Rosalba Hernandez, a professor of social work at the University of Illinois. "The correlation between optimism and cardiovascular health was consistent across heritage groups, regardless of age, sex, nativity status or level of acculturation."

Few of the individuals who scored low in optimism met the criteria for ideal heart health, Hernandez and her co-authors found. However, each percentage point increase in optimism was associated with a better cardiovascular health score.

The current study was one of the first to explore associations between emotional well-being and cardiac health in a large diverse sample of Hispanic/Latino adults.

While numerous prior studies—including a 2015 study by Hernandez—found links between a positive mental outlook and cardiovascular health, the samples in those studies contained primarily Latinos of Mexican descent, Hernandez said.

To explore whether the effect persisted across heritage groups, Hernandez's study used a sample that was much more diverse.

Latinos of Mexican heritage composed more than 37 percent of the participants, followed by Latinos of Cuban descent (20 percent), Puerto Rican (15.5 percent), Dominican (11.5 percent), Central American (7.4 percent) and South American (4.7 percent) ancestries.

Participants' cardiovascular health was assessed using the American Heart Association's "Life's Simple 7" metrics, which include blood pressure, body mass index, fasting plasma glucose and serum cholesterol levels, dietary intake, physical activity and tobacco use.

Individuals' level of dispositional optimism—their expectation that good things will happen in the future—was measured using the Life Orientation Test-Revised. The test asks participants how much they agree with statements such as, "In uncertain times, I usually expect the best." Possible scores range from six (least optimistic) to 30 (most optimistic).

Levels of optimism differed by ancestry, Hernandez and her co-authors found. Latinos of Cuban and Central American heritage were the most optimistic, while Latinos of Mexican and Puerto Rican heritage were the least likely to be positive thinkers.

Latinos with the highest levels of optimism also tended to be older, married or living with a partner, better educated and more affluent, the researchers found.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Latinos born outside the U.S. have 50 percent lower rates of cardiovascular disease compared with Latinos who are born in the U.S. Tapping into psychological assets such as optimism may provide effective, low-cost strategies for improving the [cardiovascular health](#) of some of these Latino populations, according to the study.

"Problems with access to health care, affordability and the shortage of psychologists and psychiatrists who speak Spanish are significant challenges for Latino populations in the U.S.," Hernandez said. "We need to find accessible, cost-effective ways of utilizing technology to help vulnerable populations."

In a related project, Hernandez is examining whether individuals with high blood pressure can be taught to be more optimistic and if greater optimism in turn moderates participants' hypertension. Both that project and the current study were funded by the National Heart, Lung and Blood Institute.

"We don't know much about the connections between emotional and physical health," Hernandez said. "However, if we can identify certain strengths within a population that can be used to improve their health, that would be fantastic."

The sample for the current study was drawn from the Sociocultural Ancillary Study, which explored socioeconomic, cultural and psychosocial influences on Latinos' [health](#). That study was part of a larger project called the Hispanic Community Health Study/Study of Latinos, conducted from 2008 to 2011, which included more than 16,400 Latinos living in California, Florida, Illinois and New York.

More information: Rosalba Hernandez et al, Association of dispositional optimism with Life's Simple 7's Cardiovascular Health Index: results from the Hispanic Community Health Study/Study of Latinos (HCHS/SOL) Sociocultural Ancillary Study (SCAS), *BMJ Open* (2018). [DOI: 10.1136/bmjopen-2017-019434](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2017-019434)

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