

Women with more social support are less likely to die, new study finds

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Dr. Nancy Freeborne. Credit: George Mason University

Women aged 50-79 who believed they had more social support were less likely to die during the course of the study, according to a new study led by Dr. Nancy Freeborne, adjunct professor in George Mason University's College of Health and Human Services.

Published in *Menopause* this week, Freeborne and her colleagues at multiple institutions examined perceived social [support](#) and its effect on cardiovascular disease (CVD) and mortality. Even after accounting for

factors such as income, race, and education that could have influenced the results, the researchers still found that [women](#) in this age range who reported lower levels of social support had a higher death rate during the 10 plus years of the study. In fact, they found that when women reported a very low level of social support, that predicted about a 20% greater risk of death during those same 10 plus years compared to those reporting very high levels of social support.

"Perceived functional social support, which we examined in this study, can include whether a person believes they could get [emotional support](#), advice, or just company from others to do fun things with, which can help reduce stress," explains Freeborne. "It's a reminder that sometimes the simplest things—like reaching out to a loved one—can have the most profound impact."

While Freeborne and colleagues also anticipated seeing women with higher perceived social support having a reduction in CVD due to prior studies on men, after removing those same confounding variables, they didn't find such a relationship.

"Interestingly, prior studies that found a link between social support and CVD did not account for the effect of income, and for this study, it was the factor that most influenced that relationship," explains Freeborne.

To date, this is the largest study to explore the impact of perceived social support on CVD and mortality. Freeborne and colleagues examined data on more than 90,000 postmenopausal women aged 50-79 from the Women's Health Initiative Observational Study. They included data that was collected over a period of 10 years, including demographics, psychosocial measures (perceived social support), health behaviors, diet, and body mass index.

The researchers suggest further study to account for perceived social

support delivered via [social media](#), the rise in CVD among women since the [data collection](#), and to further examine age and [gender differences](#) to determine if social support has different impacts based on gender or different periods in a lifetime.

"The main take-away from our study is that in a longitudinal study of post-menopausal women, having lower social support was linked to having slightly higher mortality risk," explains Freeborne. This suggests that social support might serve as a health intervention for some persons. It is easy and cost-effective to provide others with [social support](#)."

More information: Nancy Freeborne et al, Perceived social support and the risk of cardiovascular disease and all-cause mortality in the Women's Health Initiative Observational Study, *Menopause* (2019). DOI: [10.1097/GME.0000000000001297](https://doi.org/10.1097/GME.0000000000001297)

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