

# Giving social support to others may boost your health

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When it comes to your health, being willing to give social support to your spouse, friends and family may be just as important as receiving assistance, a new study suggests.

While researchers have long thought that receiving [social support](#) from others is a key to health, results from studies have shown mixed results. So researchers from The Ohio State University decided to see if giving [support](#) may also play an important role in health.

They found that on one important measure of health—[chronic inflammation](#)—indicators of positive social relationships were associated with lower inflammation only among people who said they were available to provide social support to [family](#) and friends.

In other words, having friends to lean on may not help your health unless you also say that you're available to help them when they need it.

"Positive relationships may be associated with lower inflammation only for those who believe they can give more support in those relationships," said Tao Jiang, lead author of the study and a doctoral student in psychology at Ohio State.

Preliminary evidence in the study suggested that the link between health and the willingness to help others may be especially important for women.

Jiang conducted the research with Jennifer Crocker, professor; Baldwin Way, associate professor; and Syamil Yakin, research assistant, all in psychology at Ohio State. Their study was published online this month in the journal *Brain, Behavior and Immunity*.

The results show that the healing power of good relationships comes from the fact that the support is mutual, Way said.

"It may be that when people believe they can give more support to friends and family, these relationships are especially rewarding and stress-relieving, which reduces inflammation," he said.

The study used data from 1,054 participants in the [National Survey of Midlife Development in the U.S.](#) These were all healthy adults between 34 and 84 years old.

Participants completed a questionnaire that measured their "social integration," asking if they were married or living with a partner, how often they contacted family and friends, and how often they attended social groups or activities.

Participants also completed a measure of how much they believed they could rely on their family, friends or spouse if they needed help.

The key to this research is the fact that the dataset is one of the few that also asked participants to rate how much they were available to support family, friends and spouse, Jiang said.

About two years later, these participants returned for blood tests, which included a test for interleukin-6 (IL-6), which is a marker of systemic inflammation in the body.

"Higher levels of IL-6 are associated with increased risk for many of the diseases that are the top killers of Americans, including cardiovascular disease and cancer," Way said.

"That's why we thought it was important to find out why previous studies found such weak evidence for the link between social support and lower inflammation."

The findings showing the importance of being available to help others held true even after taking into account a broad range of other factors that may affect [inflammation](#), from age, income and education to health behaviors, medication use and diagnosed medical conditions.

An exploratory analysis suggested that the connection between offering social support and health may be mostly found in women, Jiang said.

"This reflects the idea that social relationships are often seen as more important for women than for men," Jiang said. "But our sample size was not large enough to show that conclusively. We need to study that issue further."

Way said it is important to note that this study only looked at what people said they were willing to do, and not their actions.

But the study does give "a more nuanced understanding" of the link between [health](#) and relationships, Jiang said.

"This work underscores the importance of incorporating the concept of giving support into future research in this area," he said.

**More information:** Tao Jiang et al, Perceived Social Support-Giving Moderates the Association Between Social Relationships and Interleukin-6, *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.bbi.2021.11.002](#)

Provided by The Ohio State University

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