

Staying socially active can slow decline in older adults' ability to function

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The ability to perform the simple activities of daily living—dressing, bathing, toileting, preparing simple meals, and doing light housekeeping, for example—is crucial to an older adult's independence and quality of life. When older adults begin having trouble managing these activities by themselves, their risks for falls, hospitalization, and even death can increase. Recently, a group of researchers from the Nara Medical University in Japan examined whether or not participation in social activities could affect an older adult's ability to function. Their study was published in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*.

The research team studied 2,774 men and 3,586 women between the ages of 65 and 96. At the beginning of the study, all the participants (who lived in Nara, Japan) were able to manage their daily activities. Before the study began, participants answered questions about their participation in various kinds of [social activities](#).

During the study's three follow-up periods, nearly 14 percent of the men and 9 percent of the women began having problems handling their daily activities.

People who experienced a decline in their ability to perform daily activities tended to be older and more likely to use medications, describe their health status as poor, experience depression, and have trouble with memory or making decisions compared to those who maintained their ability to [function](#) well. These people also were less likely to participate in hobby clubs or volunteer groups versus those who could still perform simple activities of daily living.

The researchers discovered that women who participated in social activities such as hobby or senior citizen clubs and volunteer groups were less likely to experience a decline in their ability to perform daily functions. Men who participated in

hobby clubs were able to maintain their ability to function.

The researchers suggested four reasons for the link between social activities and maintaining the ability to perform one's [daily activities](#):

1. Participating in social activities means that an older adult is engaging in life—using public transportation or managing money, for example.
2. Social activities can provide support and networking, which could delay the decline in an older adult's ability to function.
3. Losing a spouse is considered a stressful experience that may speed up an older adult's functional decline. But participating in social activities may help relieve the stress of loneliness—and that might help an older adult maintain his or her ability to function.
4. Participating in social activities allows [older adults](#) to have a meaningful role in society, giving them a sense of value and belonging. This sense of value may motivate older adults to maintain their ability to function.

The researchers suggested that healthcare professionals should be aware of older adults' social activity participation—or lack of it—to help lessen the likelihood of functional decline.

More information: Kimiko Tomioka et al, Association Between Social Participation and 3-Year Change in Instrumental Activities of Daily Living in Community-Dwelling Elderly Adults, *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/jgs.14447](https://doi.org/10.1111/jgs.14447)

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