

# Older adults with small social networks less likely to get cataract surgery

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Close family relationships and a strong social network may help older adults see the world better—literally.

Writing in *JAMA Ophthalmology*, researchers at the University of Michigan Kellogg Eye Center link such networks with the likelihood of [older adults](#) getting cataract surgery - a procedure with broad implications for health.

Not only can family motivate older [adults](#) to take care of their fading vision, but also family members can help them get the care they need.

"It may get to a point that it takes people around them to speak up about their changing vision," says study author Brian Stagg, M.D., a Kellogg ophthalmologist and health services researcher at the University of Michigan.

In observations of 9,760 adults older than 65 with Medicare benefits, those with none, one or two family members had 40-percent lower odds of

receiving cataract surgery than adults with three or more [family members](#). Data came from the National Health and Aging Trends Study.

The study by Kellogg Eye Center is consistent with a trend in health research that examines the impact of social isolation on health.

"A nuanced understanding of the impact of [social support networks](#) is important to develop as we implement strategies to improve access to [cataract surgery](#) for a rapidly growing older population," says Stagg.

Primary care doctors and ophthalmologists may need to ask older adults if transportation and support is available after the procedure. A social worker could help navigate care, too, authors say.

In the study, friends, spouses or partners did not influence the decision to have [cataract surgery](#) as much as adult children.

An adult child who visits intermittently might notice vision changes in an older parent that others don't.

Cataract is one of the most common treatable causes of vision impairment in the United States. Cataract surgery can improve quality of life, reduce risk of falls and cut cognitive decline among older adults.

**More information:** Brian C. Stagg et al, Association of Social Support Network Size With Receipt of Cataract Surgery in Older Adults, *JAMA Ophthalmology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1001/jamaophthalmol.2018.0244](#)

Provided by University of Michigan

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