

Interacting with more people is shown to keep older adults more active

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Researchers at The University of Texas at Austin have found that older adults who spend more time interacting with a wide range of people were more likely to be physically active and had greater emotional well-being. Credit: University of Texas at Austin

It's been said that variety is the spice of life, and now scientists say variety in your social circle may help you live longer. Researchers at The University of Texas at Austin have found that older adults who spend more time interacting with a wide range of people were more likely to be physically active and had greater emotional well-being.

In a paper out Feb. 20 in the *Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, researchers found that study participants who interacted more with [family members](#) and [close friends](#), as well as acquaintances, casual friends, service providers and strangers were more likely to have higher levels of physical activity, less time spent sitting or lying around, greater positive moods and fewer negative feelings. It is the first study to link [social engagement](#) with physical activity throughout the day.

"Adults often grow less physically active and more

sedentary as they age, and these behaviors pose a risk factor for disease and death," said Karen Fingerman, a professor of human development and family sciences at UT Austin and the director of the university's new Texas Aging & Longevity Center. "It is difficult to convince people to go to the gym or commit to work out on a regular basis. But they may be willing to reach out to acquaintances, attend an organized group event, or talk to the barista who serves them at their favorite coffee shop. Socializing in these contexts also can increase physical activity and diverse behaviors in ways that benefit health without necessarily working up a sweat."

The researchers asked [study participants](#) about their activities and social encounters every three hours for about a week. Participants also wore electronic devices to monitor their physical activity. Fingerman and the team observed that during the three-hour periods when participants were engaging with a greater variety of social partners, they reported engaging in a greater variety of activities such as leaving the house, walking, talking with others, or shopping. They also engaged in more objectively measured physical activity, and less time being sedentary.

Previous studies have shown that close social ties, like family and close friends, can be beneficial to [older adults](#) by providing a buffer against stress and improving emotional well-being. Researchers had not examined [physical activity](#) or the benefits of more peripheral social ties.

This study showed those acquaintances or peripheral ties may encourage older adults to be more physically active, a key factor that has been shown to contribute to physical and emotional health, as well as cognitive ability.

"Older adults may be able to be more sedentary with their close friends and family—sitting and watching TV or otherwise lounging at home,"

Fingerman said. "But to engage with acquaintances, older adults must leave the house, or at least get up out of their chair to answer the door."

The study included more than 300 adults over 65 years old who lived in the Austin metro area and controlled for factors such as age, race, gender, marital status, education and ethnicity.

"Prior research on aging has focused almost entirely on the benefits of social connection with close social ties such as a spouse or an adult child," said co-author Debra Umberson, sociology professor and director of UT Austin's Population Research Center. "This new research relies on truly novel data that capture both the amount and quality of contact with all types of people that the elderly encounter throughout the day—and the results show us that these routine encounters have important benefits for activity levels and psychological well-being. This new information suggests the importance of policies and programs that support and promote routine and informal social participation."

Provided by University of Texas at Austin

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