

Staying in touch is a healthy habit

Stay in touch with your friends, not just because you like them but because having them correlates with better health.

A study co-authored by Mercy Medical Center's Kathy J. Helzlsouer, M.D., M.H.S., and Lisa Gallicchio, Ph.D., along with Sandra C. Hoffman from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, found that those who reported having more friends also rated their health as better overall.

The study, conducted in Washington County, surveyed 4,498 men and 6,948 women. Participants indicated whether they had 0 to 2 close friends, 3 to 9 close friends and 10 or more close friends, and also noted how many close friends they saw in a month. They also provided what is known as a health-related quality of life, in which they rate their overall health as excellent, very good, good, or fair/poor.

That self-rating of their health, said Dr. Helzlsouer, "encompasses a lot of factors and what has been shown is that it's a pretty good predictor of mortality."

Those who had 0 to 2 friends reported poorer health, those with 3 to 9 friends reported better health but those with 10 or more friends rated themselves the healthiest. That finding remained even when researchers controlled for other factors, such as age and smoking.

And the finding holds true for both men and women.

Dr. Helzlsouer said that men have more illnesses but report a better overall quality of life "and they tend to report they have more friends," she says, noting that 32 percent of men reported having 10 or more friends compared to 25 percent of women.

"It's interesting because we were looking at this because men report having more friends, but women live longer so it's a bit contradictory," Dr. Helzlsouer says. "But the take-home message is that it's an important factor and it's something we can help people to maintain."

Susan Scarvalone, a social worker and clinical research therapist at Mercy, notes that "friends are people in your life you feel you can turn to for mutual support and mutual interests. What was interesting about that study was that men reported more friends - men might have a different definition of friendship." She adds that men may include relationships in the workplace, ones women who work at home don't have, among their friendships. "It's a very interesting topic."

Dr. Hezlsouer also said the study reveals a correlation, not necessarily a cause. "If you have very poor health, you tend to get isolated - you can't keep up your social network," she says.

Still, the findings have clinical implications. "As people age, social isolation is an important factor," Dr. Hezlsouer says. "Hopefully we'll pay much more attention to these factors because they are important. We sort of all need the help, especially as society is aging."

Adds Scarvalone: "That's where some of the elderly are at risk for depression - they do have limited access for seeing people."