



Social Ties Can Add Years to Your Life

Close Friends, Family Members May Help Increase Longevity

By Denise Mann
WebMD Health News

Reviewed by Louise Chang, MD

July 27, 2010 -- Good friends and family do more than make life worth living. These [relationships](#) can actually add years to your life.

A new study shows that people with lots of close friends and family around will likely live a lot longer than lonesome people. The study appears in the July issue of *PLoS Medicine*.

The protective effect of having lots of healthy and fulfilling relationships is comparable to that of quitting [smoking](#), the study authors state.

"Our social relationships are important not only to our quality of life, but also our longevity," says study author Julianne Holt-Lunstad, PhD, associate professor of [psychology](#) at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, in an email. "Throughout human history, we have relied on others for survival such as protection and food, and despite modern advancements that may [help with] certain aspects of survival so that we can live more independently, it appears that our relationships nonetheless still impact odds of survival," she says.

Relationships Matter

Researchers analyzed 148 studies that examined the effect of social relationships and death risk. Together, these studies included 308,849 people who were followed for about 7.5 years on average. People were 50% more likely to be alive if they had strong social relationships. This finding held regardless of age, gender, or health status and for all causes of death.

Exactly which type of relationships are most protective is not clear from the new study. "We can't say whether family is more important than friends, but we can say that the way in which social relationships were assessed did matter," she says.

The study found that in terms of long life, strong social ties can be as important as [losing weight](#) if you are [obese](#) and [getting active](#) if you are sedentary.

"Obesity is a public health problem that needs to be addressed through effective social programs and policies, [and] the same is true of [alcoholism](#) and [high blood pressure](#)," she says. "Our data make the case that strength of social relationships needs to be added to the list of public health concerns."

One of the best things to do if you want to live longer may be to strengthen your ties, she says.

"Foster existing relationships," she says. "Call a friend, get to know your neighbors, invite a colleague to lunch, or get together with family. Look for opportunities to get to know others and/or get involved in your community and support others [because] providing support is associated with greater protection for mortality than receiving support."

As far as Facebook and social networks, the jury is still out, she says. "We know less about online social networks and their potential influence."

Findings Match Previous Research

Robert Kaplan, PhD, a distinguished professor of public health and medicine at the UCLA School of Public Health in Los Angeles, says that the new findings make sense and mirror those of studies that he has published.

"There are a variety of ways that social support may increase survival," he tells WebMD. "The [stress](#) buffering hypothesis suggests that that others around you can help absorb or buffer your stress. The direct effect model argues that having people around can help you pull in healthy habits and behaviors."

This means that if your partner or friends exercise, you are more likely to do so as well.