

Researchers discover social integration improves lung function in elderly

2 June 2014

It is well established that being involved in more social roles, such as being married, having close friends, close family members, and belonging to social and religious groups, leads to better mental and physical health. However, why social integration—the total number of social roles in which a person participates—influences health and longevity has not been clear.

New research led by Carnegie Mellon University shows for the first time that social integration impacts pulmonary function in the elderly. Lung function, which decreases with age, is an important physiological quality that affects cardiovascular disease, asthma and other lung disorders.

Published in the American Psychological Association's *Health Psychology* journal, this study also rebuffs the popular notion that marriage is the only social role required for [health](#) benefits. In fact, different social relationships can be substituted for each other and every added social role improves health.

"We knew that when older adults have friends and family and belong to groups, they have lower mortality rates and less disease and illness risk, but now we can start to understand why that happens," said Sheldon Cohen, the Robert E. Doherty University Professor of Psychology in CMU's Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences. "We also answer critical questions about the importance of marriage for health. It has been suggested that marriage—and things that typically come with it such as kids and family—is the only [social role](#) that matters. The bottom line is that marriage is not required for better health—it is the total number of social roles that predicts improved health."

For the study, the research team analyzed data collected from 1,147 healthy adults between the ages of 70 and 79 who participated in the MacArthur Study of Successful Aging. The data included a measure of the participants' social roles

and assessed their [pulmonary function](#) according to peak expiratory flow rate (PEFR).

They found that the more social roles people engaged in, the better their [lung function](#). While analysis of specific social roles indicated that marriage was the strongest positive connection to lung function, greater numbers of roles also were associated with better lung function even in those who were not married. Being a relative or a friend were also individually linked to improved lung function, but more social roles also were associated with better lung function independent of being a relative or a friend.

"Older people need to get out because any sort of social interaction will improve their health," said Crista Crittenden, visiting assistant professor of psychology at Carnegie Mellon in Qatar and the study's lead author. "I am really interested in how social and psychological factors influence lung health, and not only have we shown that more social roles, like being married or having friends, improve lung function, we found a link between more social roles and increased happiness and physical activity that could also help with lung function and overall health."

Provided by Carnegie Mellon University

APA citation: Researchers discover social integration improves lung function in elderly (2014, June 2) retrieved 4 May 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-06-social-lung-function-elderly.html>

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