

'Purpose in life' a boon to your health, study shows

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Study found those who felt their life had meaning were more likely to get screening tests such as colonoscopies, mammograms.

Older adults with a strong sense of purpose in life may be particularly likely to get health screenings such as colonoscopies and mammograms, new research suggests.

The study, of more than 7,000 Americans, found that the higher people scored on a "purpose in life" scale, the more likely they were to get various screening tests over the next six years.

And while those purpose-driven people spent more time on preventive health care, they spent less time in the hospital, researchers reported online Nov. 3 in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

"Purpose in life" refers to a feeling that your life has direction and meaning, and your [daily activities](#) matter, according to lead researcher Eric Kim, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Michigan.

Purpose, Kim said, is an important aspect of mental well-being—distinct from, say, general optimism.

"One reason," he said, "is that as people age and retire, they can lose their sense of purpose somewhat."

So researchers are interested in how that shift might affect older adults' health. Past studies, Kim said, have already found that [older adults](#) with a strong sense of purpose have lower risks of heart disease, stroke and Alzheimer's disease.

His team was interested in whether purpose-driven people make different decisions about preventive health care—which might help explain the lower disease risks.

The researchers analyzed data from 7,168 Americans aged 50 and older who took part in an ongoing health survey. That survey included some questions on purpose in life, asking people the extent to which they agreed with certain statements, such as: "I have a sense of direction and purpose in life," and "My daily activities often seem trivial and unimportant to me."

In general, the study found, the higher people's scores on the purpose scale, the greater their likelihood of getting a cholesterol test, colonoscopy, mammogram, Pap test or prostate exam over the next six years.

For example, about three-quarters of the study group got a [cholesterol test](#). But the odds went up 18 percent for every point on the purpose

scale, the investigators found.

The findings point to an association between purpose and health screenings, but not necessarily a cause-and-effect link, Kim acknowledged.

He added, though, that his team did account for several factors that could explain the link, including people's education and wealth, and symptoms of depression or anxiety. But purpose, itself, was still tied to higher rates of health screenings in the study.

People with a strong sense of purpose were also less likely to land in the hospital. Over six years, participants spent an average of seven nights in the hospital; but that time dipped by 17 percent for every point on the purpose scale.

"My guess is that there are at least two possible explanations for these findings," said James Maddux, university professor emeritus of psychology at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va.

One is that people with a sense of purpose want to be around for a long time, and in good shape. "They take care of their health because they want to prolong a life—and a healthy life—that they find meaningful," said Maddux, who was not involved in the study.

Plus, he noted, people who actively search for meaning in life may be generally better at setting goals and making plans, including [health care](#) decisions.

According to Kim, there is still good news for people who lack a sense of purpose: "It can be increased," he said.

Some studies have found that group therapy or less-formal techniques,

like meditation, can help, according to Kim. And he said retired adults can find other activities to give their days direction and purpose, such as volunteering or taking classes.

Maddux agreed. "I think the take-away," he said, "is that finding purpose and meaning in [life](#) has a lot of beneficial physical and psychological 'side effects,' beyond the good that may be done by meaningful activities themselves."

More information: Purpose in life and use of preventive health care services, *PNAS*, www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.1414826111

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