

Strong relationships promote physical activity in older adults

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Woman walking in Tirana, Albania in May 2020. Credit: Dr. Alban Ylli

Relationships are key to influencing positive health behaviors and should not be forgotten during social distancing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Strong relationships can help adults stay active in older age, according to a new study from public health researchers at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, in collaboration with international partners.

The results, published in the *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity*, show that individual and interpersonal factors had the greatest association with meeting physical activity guidelines. Participants with higher educational attainment, a [strong relationship](#) with a life partner or a network of close friends were significantly more likely to engage in [regular physical activity](#).

"We wanted to better understand how adults' levels of physical activity are affected by other aspects of their lives," said lead author Chevelle Davis, a current Ph.D. student in the Office of Public Health Studies under the Myron B. Thompson School of Social Work. "Physical activity among [older adults](#) is largely understudied in middle-income countries."

In the study, the authors examined data on 1,193 adults ages 65-74 in Albania, Brazil and Colombia. The researchers sought to understand how individual, interpersonal, organizational and community factors influenced whether the older adults met [physical activity guidelines](#), defined as 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity per week through walking.

"In the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical not to forget the importance of social relationships and maintaining physical activity to reduce chronic disease and premature death. Older adults who experience social isolation are at greater risk of depression, cognitive decline and other poor health outcomes," said Catherine Pirkle, a co-author of the study and an associate professor of public health. "We must find innovative ways to maintain connectedness and physical activity, while also following public health guidelines."

Importantly, [female participants](#), as well as all participants with depression, were less likely to engage in regular physical activity. Mental health challenges are likely to increase in this time, but walking, which is generally safe and acceptable to most older adults, has been shown to protect against depression symptoms. Walking and other forms of physical activity are allowed in parks at this time.

"These results are important because they reinforce that relationships are key to influencing positive health behaviors, including [physical activity](#)," said Pirkle. "Our findings echo other studies that have demonstrated the importance of connectivity in the aging process across different cultures. We hope this study can be used to inform health approaches and interventions targeting older adults to keep them healthy in this pandemic and beyond."

More information: Chevelle M.A. Davis et al, Meeting Physical Activity Guidelines by Walking in Older Adults From Three Middle-Income Countries:

A Cross-Sectional Analysis From the International
Mobility in Aging Study, *Journal of Aging and
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