

Socializing Can Add Years to Your Life

Having friends doesn't just help with loneliness. It may also improve your health. See how staying in touch might add years to your life.

Just like a balanced diet and exercise, an active social life is an important part of healthy living. Studies show that people who have good social networks may live longer — and better. So, how socially connected you are now may help determine how healthy and independent you will be in the future.



The benefits of staying connected

It takes effort to stay connected. Between kids and work and everything else, people are busy. Sometimes it may feel like it's just too hard to stay in touch. But if you can find the time and energy, you may be pleasantly surprised at how fulfilling it can be. Having a few close, mutually supportive friends can be a key to staying healthy. Not only is having friends more fun, these relationships may also help you:

- Feel supported
- Stay mentally sharp
- Reach your goals
- Develop a more active lifestyle
- Reduce stress
- Have better health outcomes
- Enhance your sense of well-being and happiness
- Lengthen your lifespan

What's more, some studies suggest that not having a social network can be bad for your health. Some researchers believe that social isolation can lead to a state of ongoing stress, which can eventually cause serious health problems. So staying connected has many benefits.

Tips for building a better support system

There are many ways to develop social connections in your community. Here are a few ideas:

- Take an adult-education course or classes in yoga, cooking or something else that interests you.
- Get involved at your place of worship, a club or other organization.
- Volunteer for a cause you believe in or at a local school, museum or animal shelter.
- Start or join a book club at your library.
- Join a fitness center or a walking or biking club.
- Plan a social gathering, like a game-playing or movie-watching night.

As you're meeting new people, be sure to keep up with the friends you've already got. Devoting more time and energy to these friendships can lead to deeper, more rewarding relationships.

Connect online

Friendships can grow through online communities, too. There are plenty of sites that have been designed for social interaction.

And while you're at it, consider joining an online health community. Websites like MedHelp.org provide an outlet for socializing while also promoting good physical health. Of course, you have to be active in the group to get the full benefit. Once you've joined, you can:

- Interact with like-minded people.
- Discuss health concerns with others.
- Get and give encouragement for meeting personal health goals.

Remember that no website can replace your doctor's advice.

Healthy living is like any other challenge — it's easier when others are helping you do it!

SOURCES:

- Helpguide.org. How to find a friend and build friendships.
- Mental Health Net. The value of self-help support groups.
- Helpguide.org. Healthy aging tips.