

Active social life delays memory loss

Elderly people who are active socially may delay or have a slower rate of memory loss, according to a new study.

Earlier studies have suggested that an active social life may reduce the risk of dementia among elderly. Memory loss is a strong risk factor for dementia, which afflicts millions of elderly globally.

The researchers wanted to test whether memory loss might also be associated with social connectedness.

"We hope this study adds to and advances our growing understanding of the important role that social forces play in shaping health," said Karen Ertel of Harvard School of Public Health, who led the study.

Ertel relied on data gathered from 1998 to 2004 from the Health and Retirement Study, which surveyed a large, nationally representative population of US adults 50 years and older.

Memory was assessed in 1998, 2000, 2002 and 2004 by reading a list of 10 common nouns to survey respondents, then asking them to recall as many words as possible immediately and after a five-minute delay.

The results showed that individuals with the highest social integration had the slowest rate of memory decline from 1998 to 2004.

In fact, memory decline among the most integrated was less than half the rate among the least integrated. These findings were independent of socio-demographic factors (such as age, gender, and race) and health status in 1998.

The researchers found that the protective effect of social integration was largest among individuals with fewer than 12 years of education.

The study is slated to appear in the July issue of the American Journal of Public Health.

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