



# Benefits of Friendship

Good friends may help your life last longer!

A recent study followed nearly 1,500 older people for 10 years. It found that those who had a large network of friends outlived those with fewer friends by more than 20%.

Why? Some think good friends keep you from doing things that are bad for you, like smoking and heavy drinking. Friends may also ward off depression, boost your self-esteem, and provide support.

As people age, they tend to be more selective in their choice of friends, so they spend more time with people they like.

Close relationships with children and relatives, in contrast, had almost no effect on longevity. Lynne C. Giles, one of the researchers who conducted the study, emphasized that family ties are important; they just seem to have little effect on survival.

## The Health Benefits of Good Friends

Lots of research has shown social support and good health is connected.

One recent study of people with ovarian cancer says those with lots of social support had much lower levels of a protein linked to more aggressive cancers. This made their chemotherapy treatments more effective.

In another study, women with breast cancer in a support group lived twice as long as those not in a group. They also had much less pain.

Sheldon Cohen, PhD, a psychology professor at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, says strong social support helps people cope with stress.

"There may be broader effects as well," Cohen says. "Friends encourage you to take better care of yourself. And people with wider social networks are higher in self-esteem, and they feel they have more control over their lives."

Other studies show people with fewer friends tend to die sooner after having a heart attack than people with a strong social network. Having lots of friends may even reduce your chance of catching a cold.

"People with social support have fewer cardiovascular problems and immune problems, and lower levels of cortisol -- a stress hormone," says Tasha R. Howe, PhD, associate professor of psychology at Humboldt State University.

"[We] are social animals, and we have evolved to be in groups," Howe says. "We have always needed others for our survival. It's in our genes." People with a big social group tend to be more at peace, which leads to better health, Howe says.

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