

Active Social Life May Delay Memory Loss

Memory loss can have devastating effects on the quality of life among older people. In a study which appears in the July 2008 issue of the *American Journal of Public Health*, Harvard School of Public Health researchers found evidence that older adults in the U.S. who have an active social life may have a slower rate of memory decline. "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, one of the researchers on the project. Previous studies have suggested that an active social life may reduce the risk of dementia and cognitive decline among older adults. Memory loss is a strong risk factor for dementia, a syndrome estimated to affect up to 10 percent of the U. S. population 65 years and older. The researchers wanted to test whether memory loss might also be associated with social connectedness.

Ertel and her colleagues used data gathered from 1998 to 2004 from the *Health and Retirement Study*. 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 other factors such as age, gender, and health status in 1998. "Social participation and integration have profound effects on health and well being of people during their lifetimes," said the study authors. "We know from previous studies that people with many social ties have lower mortality rates. We now have mounting evidence that strong social networks can help to prevent declines in memory. As our society ages and has more and more older people, it will be important to promote their engagement in social and community life to maintain their well being." The results suggest that increasing social integration may help be good for memory by slowing memory decline among older Americans.