

# Busy social calendar could slow memory loss for seniors

By Jeff Schnauffer

## Seniors can help stave off memory loss by maintaining active social lives, a new study finds.

The key to retaining your memory as you age may lie in spreading your wings, social butterfly-style.

A new study by researchers from the Harvard School of Public Health found evidence that elderly people in the U.S. who have an active social life may have a slower rate of memory decline.

"This study adds to our evidence that social interactions are important for health and well-being," says Karen Ertel, lead author of the study and a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Society, Human Development and Health at HSPH.

The study, which appeared in the July 2008 issue of the American Journal of Public Health, used data gathered from 1998 to 2004 from the Health and Retirement Study, a large, nationally representative population of U.S. adults 50 years and older.

Memory decline among the most integrated was less than half the rate among the least integrated, according to the study. These results were independent of sociodemographic factors and baseline health conditions.

"Interestingly, we found that social integration may be particularly important for individuals with low levels of education (fewer than 12 years of school completed)," Ertel says. "Elderly with low levels of education experienced, on average, more rapid decline in memory, but also a suggestion of a greater benefit due to social integration."

Researchers assessed social integration according to marital status, engaging in volunteer activities, and frequency of contact with parents, children and neighbors, Ertel says.

Several hypotheses exist about why social interactions may protect against cognitive decline. Ertel highlighted three of them:

1. Social interactions present complex cognitive and memory challenges.
2. Social connections may encourage elder folks to engage in more healthful behaviors, such as physical activity or using medications consistently and properly.
3. Finally, the good feelings, emotional validation, and greater sense of purpose that may be derived from social interactions could have direct neurohormonal benefits in such a way as to reduce declines in memory and cognition.

Cathy Carpenter, program coordinator at ONEgeneration in Encino, Calif., believes the study mirrors her observations of the 200 seniors who come to her center daily for socialization and enrichment activities.

"When you get to be this age, a lot of people need social interaction, which stimulates your brain," Carpenter says. "It also improves your physical fitness skills, since your brain tells your body what to do. It's all tied in together."

Memory loss and dementia pose a major public health burden among the elderly U.S. population. The results suggest that increasing social integration may help slow memory decline among older Americans and could help alleviate the public health burden, particularly because the aging population in the U.S. is expected to increase substantially.

"Future research should focus on identifying the specific aspects of social integration most important for preserving memory," Ertel says.