March 7, 2019

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Report on Benefit of social engagement to seniors

A large body of research shows that social engagement is associated with better physical and mental health in seniors. Seniors who are more socially engaged have lower rates of cognitive decline (that is, a decline in memory and thinking abilities over time) \(^1-^4\) and a lower risk for dementia \(^5-^10\). For example, one study showed that older adults who were frequently socially active had a rate of cognitive decline that was 70% lower than older adults who were infrequently socially active over an average of 5 years \(^1\). Another study showed that older adults who participated in frequent social activity had a 40% reduced risk of developing dementia compared to those who were not socially engaged. More socially engaged older adults also have less decline in motor function such as muscle strength and walking speed \(^11\), lower risk of becoming disabled \(^12,^13\), and even a lower risk of dying \(^14-^16\). One study showed that the risk of developing a disability in an activity of daily living such as bathing or feeding oneself decreased by 43% over 5 years for each additional social activity engaged in. There are a number of aspects of social engagement that have been linked to physical and mental health including the actual performance of activities with other people \(^1,^11-^13\), the size \(^8,^17,^18\) and diversity \(^15\) of one’s social network, the amount of social and emotional support \(^19,^20\) received from your network of friends and family, and the negative aspects of social isolation and loneliness \(^5,^16,^21,^22\). All of these aspects of social engagement are believed to be beneficial to older adults and likely work together to lower stress, help to maintain physiological
process, and improve well-being. The scientific literature is overall quite consistent in demonstrating that remaining socially engaged is tightly linked to better health and function as we age.

In addition to prevention of cognitive and other problems with health and function in healthy seniors, there is also a large body of research showing that social engagement is important to the health and well-being of older persons who are already suffering from dementia\textsuperscript{23,24}. Persons with dementia often feel isolated from other people due to their cognitive impairment, which can lead to anxiety, depression, and withdrawal. Providing the opportunity for social interactions increases self-confidence and has been shown to lead to healthier eating habits, increased physical exercise and other stimulating activities, and improved quality of life\textsuperscript{24}. Another study addressed loneliness in persons with mild dementia through social interventions such as group art, writing, and other inspiring activities and showed that participants in the intervention groups had improved health-related quality of life and a slowed course of disease\textsuperscript{25}. Finally, a study showed that over 6 months, persons with dementia randomized to a social activity intervention actually maintained their level of function in activities of daily living better than persons with dementia randomized to an exercise intervention\textsuperscript{26}. Therefore, social engagement is not only important to preventing dementia, but important to improving the quality of life and even improving prognosis for seniors once they do fall into the grip of Alzheimer’s disease or other types of dementia.
References


