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More Social Activity Prevents Cognitive Decline in the Elderly

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May 6, 2011– Frequent engagement in social activities may prevent cognitive decline in patients 65 years or older, according to a recent study.

Bryan D. James, Ph.D., with the Rush Alzheimer's Disease Center in Chicago, Illinois, and colleagues reported their findings online April 8 in the *Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society*.

Previous studies had suggested a correlation between increased social activity and decreased cognitive decline in older patients, but those studies were not able to determine whether social activity is a true risk factor for cognitive decline.

To address this issue in their study, James and colleagues followed patients over a longer period, assessed cognition with multiple tests, and made analytical adjustments for more confounding variables.

"This study provides convincing evidence that a socially active lifestyle can help to prevent cognitive decline in old age," the authors state.

A total of 1138 patients who were dementia-free at study start and already enrolled in the Rush Memory and Aging Project were evaluated. The study examined the relationship between the level of social activity and cognitive decline over an average 5-year follow-up period.

Social activity scores were determined by self-reporting of involvement in six social activities: participation in organized social groups; visiting family or friends; trips to restaurants, sporting events or to play bingo; day or overnight trips; volunteer work; and attending religious services.

Participation was scored using a 5-point scale, with levels of participation ranging from once a year or less (1 point) to every day or almost every day (5 points).

Reported social activity scores were between 1 and 4.2, with higher scores indicating greater activity. Analysis revealed that an increase of one point correlated with a 47% decrease in the rate of global cognitive decline.

After adjustments were made for social network size, depressive symptoms, disability, chronic medical conditions, neuroticism, extraversion, and physical activity level, the rate of overall cognitive decline was reduced by an average 70% in socially active participants.

The authors speculate that social activity may promote or maintain efficient neural networks, reduce the body's response to stress, or promote cardiopulmonary benefits through the slight increase in physical activity required for social activity.

Limitations of the study included self-reporting of social and physical activity, the advanced age of patients at baseline and a cohort of mostly white patients. In addition, the study could not account for the influence of social activity levels earlier in life.

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