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Importance of Social Support & Relationships

Social interaction and good relationships can help you feel well and live a healthy balanced life. When these key contributors to health are lacking, the risk of disease increases.[1] The following diagram shows some of the health effects associated with poor social support, isolation, and loneliness.[2,3]

Brain & Nervous System:

- Decreased brain function and memory[4]
- Higher risk of dementia (e.g., Alzheimer's)[5,6]
- Poorer coping with a chronic disease[7]
- Greater risk for depression and anxiety[8]

Heart & Blood Vessels:

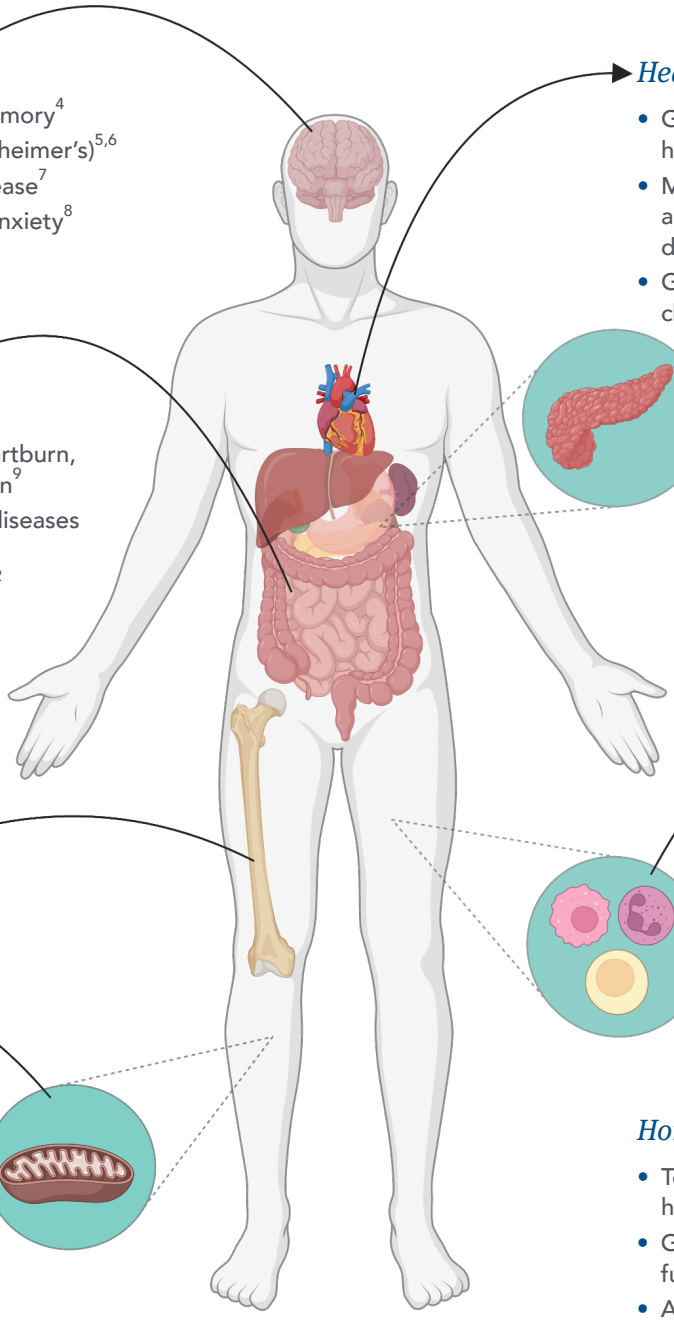
- Greater risk of high blood pressure, heart disease, and stroke[24]
- More likely to have excess abdominal fat, a risk factor for heart disease[25]
- Greater risk of unhealthy cholesterol levels[26]

Gut Health & Digestion:

- Greater risk of gut issues like heartburn, bloating, nausea, and constipation[9]
- Worse symptoms in chronic gut diseases (e.g., Crohn's)[10,11]
- Changes in healthy gut bacteria[12]

Blood Sugar Control:

- Higher blood sugar levels[27]
- Greater risk of type 2 diabetes[28]
- Poorer diabetes management[29]



Musculoskeletal:

- Weaker (less dense) bones[13] and bone issues (fractures and bone mineral density)[14–16] in elderly population[17,18]
- Higher risk of muscle wasting[19,20]

Inflammation & Immunity:

- Increased inflammation[30,31]
- Slower wound healing[32]
- Weakened immunity[33]

Energy & Cell Health:

- Defective mitochondria (the energy factories in most cells)[21]
- Greater risk of cellular damage and dysfunction[22]
- Faster aging[23]

Hormone Regulation:

- Too much or too little of the "stress hormone" cortisol[34]
- Greater risk of low thyroid function[35]
- Altered sex hormone levels[36]

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Tips to Increase Your Support Network

Building and keeping a good social support network may take a little more effort during certain times of your life, such as when you move to a new town or retire. Here are some strategies you can use to expand your network of close friends, casual acquaintances, and mentors.

- **Cultivate a variety of relationship types:** This could include both local and long-distance friends. For example, perhaps there is someone in your local area who supports the same sports team, while a long-distance friend shares a common interest or hobby with you. Each person can provide a different aspect of support in your life.[37]
- **Plan social interaction:** Schedule virtual or phone dates with long-distance friends, or set up walks with local friends.[38]
- **Volunteer:** For example, consider volunteering at a charity, food bank, animal shelter, or religious organization.[39]
- **Join a book club or meetup group:** Many areas have a wide variety of interest groups, including activity groups like outdoor or mall walking. There are also many online group options, such as those learning a new language.
- **Take a class:** Select one focused on something you'd like to learn more about. For example, cooking or crafts classes are a great way to interact with new people and learn new skills.
- **Sign up for a trip:** A bus tour or other trip organized for a group could be a fun way to meet others if you enjoy travelling.
- **Help your neighbors:** Offering to lend a helping hand is a great way to start building a friendship with your neighbors. For example, let them know you can water their garden or put out their trash bins when they travel.[40-42]
- **Take care of a pet:** Pets can provide positive mental and physical health benefits. Pet your cat or walk your dog. Petting an animal for as little as 10 minutes can lower the stress hormone cortisol.[43] If you don't have a pet, consider volunteering to walk a neighbor's dog or adopting a pet.[44–46]



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