

# Thank God for your good health

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Want to live longer ? Medical research from the national Institute of Healthcare Research in America to be published next week suggests you might be better attending church than going to the gym.

The analysis of 42 research studies investigating the role of religion in health, in which 126,000 people were interviewed, has established that religious involvement was helpful in the prevention of specific medical problems such as cancer, heart disease and mental illness. For example, the religious have lower blood pressure than the non-religious, but this is the first study to examine so comprehensively perhaps the most definitive measure of health : how long you live.

"The odds of survival for people who rated higher on measures of public and private religious involvement were 29% higher than those people who scored lower on such measures", said the psychologist Dr. Michael McCullough, who was the lead author.

The results indicated that involvement in public religious activity was particularly important in predicting mortality. In other words, although those who say they are religious are likely to live a little longer than those who profess no religious beliefs, the real health benefits of religion kick in most significantly when religious activities such as regular church attendance is involved. Even within religious communities , the more you attend church, the better your health.

Another recent study included in McCullough's pooling of results, involving more than 21,000 representative American subjects, found that those who never attended church had almost twice the risk of death in the nine-year follow up period, compared with those who attended more than once a week. This translated into a seven-year difference in life expectancy at the age of 20 between those who never attend and those who attend a religious ceremony of some sort more than once a week.

"Moreover, results seemed to indicate that those people with a high level of religious involvement were also less obese", said McCullough. "In part, the effects of religious involvement on physical health variables like obesity appear to explain why religious involvement predicts reduced risk of mortality."

Many religions are proscriptive about excessive alcohol use, eating meat, drug abuse and even smoking, and this may go some way to explaining why the religious live longer.

The authors suggest that people who are actively religious also tend to take better care of themselves in several health areas, perhaps because they have greater respect for the body. It is also true, however, that many of us turn to religion only after we have already become ill, making these results even more surprising.

In addition, the health benefits of being religious may also be partly due to the social support and friendship-making derived from frequent attendance at religious

services. Mental health benefits may be significant. There is a strong link between psychological and physical health - for example, depression and hostility have both been found to predict heart disease.

The meaning to life that religions offer and the sense that all injustice will ultimately be corrected by God seem to bring hope in the face of despair and so assist in coping with psychological stress.

The authors of the study speculate that the psychological benefits of religion may in particular explain why women seem to benefit much more from religious involvement than men in terms of longevity. Although both sexes live significantly longer if they take part in religions, women gain almost twice the benefit that men receive. This might be because women are twice as prone to depression as men, and may receive more psychological support from religion as a result.

A recent study from the University of Texas confirmed that long-term survival after open-heart surgery was significantly linked to positively deriving comfort from your religion. The authors of the Texas study also suggest that the religious perhaps suffer from less anxiety about death than the non-religious, thanks to a comforting belief in the afterlife, and this in itself could explain a better mortality. Perhaps becoming stressed at the prospect of death merely makes it all the more likely.

But science also finds support for the idea that religious involvement is helpful beyond the more mundane benefits of group support. For example, recent research on Israeli kibbutzism, which are usually cohesive supportive communities, established that living in more religious kibbutzism was associated with considerably lower mortality than in the more secular ones.

Another intriguing finding is a study from Yale University that found that the religious are much less likely to die in the month before their religious holidays. A scientific explanation is that the anticipation of a time when religious rituals will take place provides more psychological support.

McCullough, a scientist with a PhD in psychology, describes himself as a "generic Christian" but hopes that now, more atheists and agnostics in his field will study religion, as traditionally, psychologists are less religious than the general population.

He points out that his study does not provide any guidance on whether taking up religion in the hope of living longer had the same impact on your health as if you genuinely believed for other reasons. Specialists in the area of the health benefits of religion speculate that, if a faith is used as a means to an end, rather than being taken up purely or itself, it won't have the same psychological impact.

McCullough argues that, as religion has been found by science to be considerably helpful in prolonging life, this is a phenomenon that deserves much more research attention than it has previously received from doctors. The effect of religion on mortality appears to be as powerful as other variables that traditionally receive more attention, such as social class and wealth.

This suggests that religion should now be routinely taken into account when doctors are trying to predict lifespan.

Could the disciplines that religious observance encourages simply be achieved by being more disciplined, without having to attend all those boring sermons ?

Perhaps the answer lies in a Gallup poll of Americans that compared people in low "spiritual commitment" with highly spiritual people. The latter were twice as likely to say they were "very happy".

Religion appears to bestow on believers a contentment and resilience in the face of misfortune that is due to the hope provided by faith, with which modern medicine and psychotherapy can still, even after thousands of years, simply not compete. Increasingly close links are being uncovered between mental well-being and physical health - for example, if you feel good about yourself, you are more likely to take care of body - so it would appear that this is probably the true secret of the power of religion to extend life.

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