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Can prayer lower high blood pressure?

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A new study that was conducted by Duke University Medical Center in Durham, NC, showed that those who pray and attend religious services on a weekly basis, especially the "young elderly" between 65 and 74, had lower blood pressure than their counterparts who didn't.

JET contacted noted experts on spirituality and medicine to find out, Can prayer lower high blood pressure?

"It can do that and a lot more," reveals physician Dr. Elaine R. Ferguson to JET. "On a physiological level, you're in direct communion with God when you pray. There are physiological changes that occur in the brain. Positive changes take place in the

hypothalamus--the part of the brain that really regulates the body's physiology--when chemicals are released to lower blood pressure, lower muscle tension, lower heart rate and increase the lungs' capacity to carry oxygen."

Dr. Ferguson, who is on staff at The Clinic in Altgeld in Chicago, says that many are beginning to take a closer look at spirituality and the role it plays in health because there's an underlying movement to include things that are not considered scientific which have been left out by modern medicine.

"Technology, drugs and surgery is not enough. We must give patients more. The spiritual is one of those things," asserts the author of *Healing, Health and Transformation: New Frontiers In Medicine*. "If we look at our health status in this country, we're realizing that something is missing. The whole aspect of the patient we haven't treated, and that's the spiritual. We're spiritual beings; it's part of our natural physiology that we have overlooked in this material world. We have not focused on the spiritual aspect, only on the five senses. We are connected to something greater than we are which we call God."

The recent Duke study, which examined 4,000 North Carolinians between the ages of 65 and older, found that the more religious the person, particularly a person who attended religious services and prayed weekly or studied the Bible at least once a week, the lower his blood pressure. Those people, according to the study, were 40 percent less likely to have high diastolic pressure or diastolic hypertension, which is associated with heart attacks and strokes, than those who didn't attend religious services, prayed weekly or studied the Bible at least once a week.



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Dr. David B. Larson, president of the National Institute for Healthcare Research in Rockville, MD, who co-authored the study, says research has shown that prayer can lower high blood pressure, most notably for the "young elderly."

"The at-risk population of people with illnesses, such as the elderly, seem to be helped if they have a faith and religious commitment," explains Dr. Larson. "You don't want to be anxious and nervous when you're elderly, though you might have problems and stress. You want to cope. It helps in coping skills when you have faith and turn to God and pray."

Numerous studies have shown that religious people are less depressed, have healthier immune systems and deal better with addictions than the nonreligious. What is it about prayer that affects health in such a positive way?

"Prayer is a way of relaxing," concedes Dr. Larson. "It's a way to handle stress when you do it because you slow down and think. You set aside time to worship and relax. That's where some of the benefits are."

The Duke study also reported that the associations between religious activity and blood pressure were strongest among not only the "young elderly," but also among African-Americans.

"We think this is a race-free effect, but for one population, it was more beneficial," notes Dr. Larson. "The church is a very important institution in the Black community. There is a richness and depth there that the rest of us don't fully understand. In the African-American community there is a recognition that church and prayer is power."

Dr. David R. Williams, professor of sociology and senior research scientist at the University of Michigan, reveals that research indicates the use of relaxation strategies, which include prayer, can in fact be helpful in controlling blood pressure.

"Prayer for many involves meditation," he says. "It can help people to relax. It helps to ease the burdens they carry. Prayer is a form of coping. You get a partner to help you deal with situations that you're facing. They can turn their problems over to God, who will assist them in confronting challenges. This can give a person a sense of relief."

In the late '80s Dr. Ezra Griffith did a study at Yale University Medical School on Wednesday night prayer meetings. It found that all the elements that exist within a therapeutic session also existed within the weekly prayer meetings, Dr. Williams points out.

"They are an alternative form of psychotherapy," he maintains about prayer meetings. "All of the therapeutic elements that are found in a counseling session like the feedback and emotional support were the same as found in the prayer meetings."

Dr. Williams also contends that attending church and praying on a regular basis could be helpful in lowering high blood pressure because it provides social support.

Explains Dr. Williams, "There is a network of friends who supplement a network of relatives who are supportive over the life course."

While the study found that prayer tended to benefit African-Americans more in lowering their blood pressure, it is still an issue that African-Americans continue to suffer from hypertension at greater rates than others.

"Religion can play a protective role, but it can't help to overcome everything. Were it not for religion, the health of Blacks would be a lot worse," cites Dr. Williams. "Here we have religion helping, but still African-Americans do poorly in terms of health. It illustrates that religion is an important protective resource for the Black population. The very fact that we have survived is a testimony that in the spirit of all that we've been exposed to, we're still a population thriving

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