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Language Barriers Lead to Poorer Health Among Older Mexican Americans

Delayed care, missed screenings and lack of important information may jeopardize the health of Mexican seniors who speak only Spanish.

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When it comes to maintaining health, communication matters. In fact, a new study from the University of Georgia (UGA) suggests English language proficiency is linked to mortality and well-being among Latinos, and Mexican-American residents of primarily Spanish-speaking neighborhoods may be particularly disadvantaged, UGA Today reports.

According to UGA Today, older Mexican Americans are more likely to have lower English-speaking proficiency than other Latino groups.

Conducted by researchers at the Institute of Gerontology at UGA's College of Public Health, the study looked at the link between language isolation and health outcomes among older Mexicans. Analyzing data from the Hispanic Established Populations for the Epidemiologic Study of the Elderly, a survey of over 1,100 Mexican Americans ages 65 and older, researchers found that those who lived in a neighborhood where more than a third of households do not speak English proficiently had mortality rates up to 1.25 times higher than the general population.

Survey findings followed respondents for up to 13 years and accounted for individual-level factors, such as smoking status and alcohol use, as well as community-level factors, such as poverty rates and demographics. Still, those who spoke English appeared to be at a significant health advantage compared with their Spanish-only speaking peers.

The reasons are multifold, say researchers. For one thing, not speaking English could lead to delayed care, missed screenings and a lack of important health information and access to care. Language isolation is also linked to poor mental health, a factor that could contribute to poorer physical health outcomes.

"If you are linguistically isolated, you're very likely to be isolated socially, and we know social isolation leads to mortality," said study coauthor Kerstin Emerson, PhD, a clinical professor of gerontology at UGA. "It's not just that you're not using the health care system; you're very likely

not to have a large social network outside of your neighborhood. The bigger your social networks are, the more likely you are to find out about services," she added.

In addition to Kerstin Emerson, PhD, increasing language proficiency in Latino communities, study authors also recommend that health care providers be trained to provide culturally adaptive services to non–English-speaking people and do more with regard to outreach than just translate pamphlets to bring preventive care to those at risk.

On the flip side, speaking more than one language may have benefits for mental health. For more on that topic, read "Brain-Mapping Bilingualism."

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