TuSalud

Language Barriers Up the Risk of Poor Health Outcomes for Older Latinos

Increasing the number of bilingual health care professionals as well as resources at the community level could help Latino seniors thrive.

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During the pandemic, many Latinos who weren't conversant in English experienced isolation when they sought health care services. Now, findings from a recent study published in the medical journal Health Equity show that living in a neighborhood where residents were not proficient in English predicted a higher rate of death among older Mexican Americans, reports a press release from the University of Georgia (UGA).

For the study, researchers from the Institute of Gerontology in UGA's College of Public Health and colleagues reviewed survey responses from more than 1,100 Mexican Americans 65 and older who lived in Arizona, California, Colorado, New Mexico or Texas and participated in the Hispanic Established Populations for the Epidemiologic Studies of the Elderly.

This ongoing longitudinal inquiry gathered demographic and personal health information from people in this population group from 1993 to 1994 and from 2004 to 2005.

Researchers focused on individuals who resided in areas defined as having "the highest level of linguistic isolation." In these neighborhoods, more than 30% of households had either no one age 14 or older at home who spoke only English or no one age 14 or older who could speak English very well. Scientists described these households as being linguistically isolated.

In addition, investigators controlled for lifestyle factors such as smoking and alcohol use and poverty, which contribute to death from any cause.

Results showed that death rates were about 1.25 times higher among elderly Mexican Americans who resided in neighborhoods with a large number of households living in linguistic isolation.

"If you are linguistically isolated, you're very likely to be isolated socially, and we know social isolation contributes to mortality," said Kerstin Gerst Emerson, PhD, a professor in the health science department at UGA, a study coauthor.

But, she added, "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."

Researchers noted that these findings support prior studies that link linguistic isolation with poor mental health, subpar access to health services and stress overload that could trigger depression.

Scientists suggested that older adults essentially segregated from others because of difficulties understanding English might also suffer from social isolation and loneliness, which are risk factors for premature death.

"Older Mexican Americans living in linguistically isolated households are particularly vulnerable," researchers wrote. "At a time of limited resources, interventions targeted at these communities should focus not only on sharing availability of resources but also on linguistic services to access available resources."

To learn more about other factors that affect non–English-speaking seniors' access to health care, read "Older Immigrants Face More Challenges During Pandemic."

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