



Director's Note

In the past year, many of you agreed to provide a blood sample to add to the growing wealth of HRS data you have contributed. Others will be asked to give blood in the coming year. It is important for you to know that your blood sample is held strictly confidential. When information from it is combined with that from the blood samples of thousands of other HRS participants, it will be used by scientists from around the world to try to answer key questions on how people can stay healthy as they age. Unlike when your doctor draws your blood to check whether you have problems like diabetes, information from all of the blood samples will be organized together, and combined with all of the other HRS data that you've provided, to look for general patterns that can point researchers toward explanations for health problems among U.S. adults and ways to better prevent or treat those problems.

For instance, your blood is being tested to show how hard your immune system is working to keep your body healthy. This level of inflammation in your body may be affected not only by medical conditions you may have such as diabetes or high blood pressure, but also by how much stress you are feeling due to your job or your commute to work, aspects of your neighborhood, whether you are exercising regularly, and even how many friends and family provide you with support when you need it. Understanding these complicated and changing relationships will help researchers pinpoint the most important factors to keep people healthy as they age. As part of our protocol, Dr. Ken Langa, Associate Director of the HRS and a doctor of internal medicine, reviews results that are outside of the normal range and has called some of you with these results. Thankfully, in nearly all cases, people and their doctors were already aware of the conditions.

Thank you for continuing to provide the HRS, and all the scientists who use the HRS data, with this important information that will be used to help people to live healthier and longer in the years ahead!

David Weir, Director
Health and Retirement Study

HRS will be used by scientists from around the world to try to answer key questions on how people can stay healthy as they age.

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Mediterranean Diet Improves Memory

The Mediterranean diet has become popular for its many health benefits, which may even include improved memory. In 2014, HRS asked some participants questions about their diet. Researchers used this information to group people based on how closely their food choices followed the Mediterranean diet, including whole grains, fruits, vegetables, potatoes, beans and nuts, fish, and olive oil. They compared it to a diet that



included red meats, butter, cheese, pastries and sweets, fried and fast food. Those who ate very close to the Mediterranean diet had much better memory than those who did not follow that eating pattern.

Source: McEvoy and others, *Journal of the Gerontological Society*, 2017



Buying a Home after 50 Improves Mental Health

Owning a home can bring many benefits, both financial and emotional. Researchers found that after age 50 it's still not too late to feel the emotional lift new homeownership can bring. HRS participants who bought a home after age 50 had a decrease in symptoms of depression over two years. There are several possible reasons for this. Becoming a homeowner may mean more stability, better quality housing, better social contacts and contact with the community. It may also be a sign of improving finances at older ages. Those who became homeowners after age 50 were more likely to be female, Black or Hispanic, and with lower education and income compared to those who were already homeowners.

Source: Emilie Courtin and others, *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 2017



Researcher Q&A

Amanda Sonnega is a social epidemiologist and Associate Research Scientist with the Health and Retirement Study. Her research focuses on physical and mental health in aging individuals. One line of her research looks at factors influencing sleep in older adults. We talked with her about her current work using information from HRS to explore the connection between physical activity and sleep, which was presented at the 21st International Association of Gerontology and Geriatrics World Congress (hosted by the Gerontological Society of America) in 2017.



Can you tell us about your main findings?

By tracking how much exercise HRS participants are getting and how well they're sleeping over a ten year period, we found that physical activity was associated with fewer sleep problems and times when people reported more physical activity than was typical for them were associated with fewer sleep problems. This finding suggests that any improvement in a person's level of exercise may help to improve their sleep. An important thing to note, though, is that the effect is moderate. On average, an increase in physical activity is associated with a modest improvement in sleep.

Starting a moderate intensity workout program—such as walking for 30 minutes at least several times a week—is not likely to harm sleep and most likely to benefit sleep.

Is the relationship the same at all ages?

The positive impact of physical activity on sleep problems was stronger for younger than older adults, growing steadily weaker with increasing age. It isn't clear why this may be so. It is clear that we need to understand more about the relationship between physical activity and sleep in older individuals.

What are the implications of this work?

Our findings suggest that especially for those beginning to age, starting a moderate intensity workout program—such as walking for 30 minutes at least several times a week—is not likely to harm sleep and is most likely to benefit sleep.

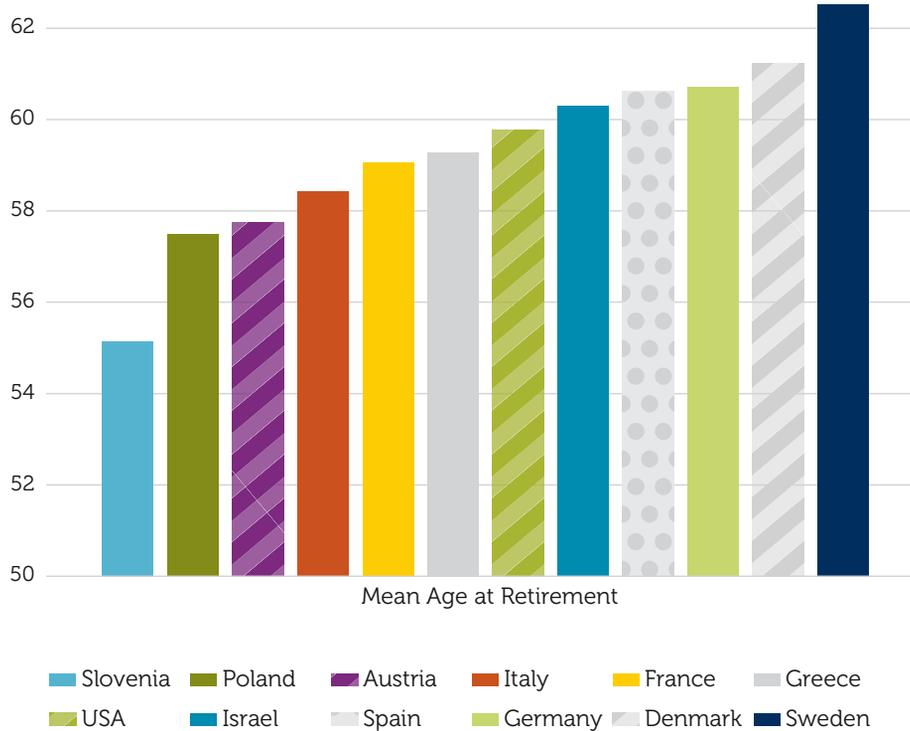


Managing Pain May Reduce Loneliness

People living with chronic pain can have difficulty getting around, which can put them at risk of being lonely. For HRS participants who were over age 60 and were not lonely, experiencing pain was associated with becoming lonely over time. Of those who were not lonely at the beginning, 31.7% reported loneliness four years later. Compared with those who had no pain, those with chronic pain were 1.5 times more likely to become lonely. Appropriate pain management could prevent future loneliness.

Source: Kerstin Emerson and others, *Journal of Aging and Health*, 2017

Retirement Ages in the HRS and around the World, 2014



Did you know that the HRS is the model for a large number of studies of aging around the world? This means that we can compare information on how people live and age in different countries. This chart shows the average age that people retire in the U.S. (represented by the HRS) compared to 11 countries in Europe and Israel. The earliest average age of retirement shown here is Slovenia (55.1 years), and the latest is Sweden (62.5 years). The average retirement age in the U.S is 59.8 years old.

A Dog's Life

Most people who own dogs know how much joy they can bring to life, but do they expect health benefits? Researchers asked HRS participants who owned dogs about their feelings of bonding with their dog. For example, do they consider their dog a friend and do they talk



with others about their dog? The researchers also found out how much time dog owners spent walking their dogs. It turns out that simply owning a dog did not provide health benefits. But for dog owners who walked their dogs, the walking was connected to many health benefits, such as lower weight, fewer physical limitations, and fewer visits to the doctor. People with stronger bonding to their dogs were more likely to walk their dogs and for longer times than those who felt less connected to their dogs.

Source: Angela Curl and others, *The Gerontologist*, 2017

Keep in Touch

Contact Your Contact Person

As you know, at the end of your interview, we ask you to provide a name or two of a close family member or friend who we can contact if we are unable to reach you. It may be helpful to let your contact people know you have named them as a resource for us, in case we need to reach out to them. Thank you!

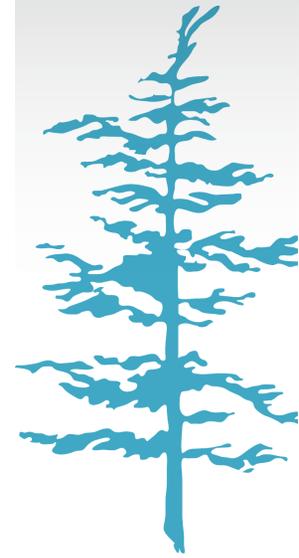
Have You Moved?

Have you changed your address or phone number? Please call or write to us at the toll free number or address listed to the right. You can also e-mail us at HRS-QandA@umich.edu with any changes. Be sure to check the HRS participant website for updates as well! Visit the participant website at: <http://hrsparticipants.isr.umich.edu/>



Certificate of Confidentiality

This research is funded by the NIH and holds a Certificate of Confidentiality (CoC) that offers additional protections for your identifiable research information, biospecimens, and records. The most important protection is that we cannot be forced to provide information about you in response to a court order unless you give us permission. Disclosure of your research information may only occur in limited specific instances. For the full detailed description of the CoC protections and exceptions to those protections, please refer to: <https://humansubjects.nih.gov/coc/NIH-funded>



Contact HRS

Toll Free

English 1-866-611-6476

Spanish 1-800-643-7605

Mail

Health & Retirement Study
426 Thompson St
PO Box 1248
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1248

Email

HRS-QandA@umich.edu

Website

<http://hrsparticipants.isr.umich.edu>

University of Michigan Board of Regents

Michael J. Behm
Mark J. Bernstein
Shauna Ryder Diggs
Denise Ilitch
Andrea Fischer Newman
Andrew C. Richner
Ron Weiser
Katherine E. White
Mark S. Schlissel (*ex officio*)



426 Thompson Street
PO Box 1248
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1248

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

