

Study shows social support key to quality sleep for people with multiple sclerosis

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The COVID-19 pandemic caused many people to lose sleep, not to mention the loss of in-person activities and social interactions. A new study from the University of Kansas shows that for people with multiple

sclerosis, who often deal with sleep difficulty, having social support was key to predicting sleep quality, which in turn is vital to health and quality of life.

Researchers at KU and the KU Medical Center's Multiple Sclerosis Clinic regularly work with people with MS. They've long seen how the neurological condition can result in poor sleep. They also work with individuals to better understand the full scope of their health and how factors like social support and sleep influence their overall well-being. The research team surveyed 163 adults with multiple sclerosis from February to May 2021 about their [sleep quality](#) and social supports during the [pandemic](#).

"We noticed a good portion of participants were not the best sleepers. We were really interested in looking at socially, how things changed for them during the pandemic," said Taylor Harris, doctoral student in counseling psychology and the study's lead author. "People with MS have additional needs, and the pandemic affected social life for all of us. We were curious to assess if their social interactions had an impact on their sleep."

Results showed that individuals who reported having social support routinely reported higher sleep quality. When adjusting for types of support, results showed that emotional/informational support, tangible support such as help with daily tasks, and positive social interaction support significantly predicted sleep quality. When controlling for age, education and disability status, sleep quality was predicted by tangible support and positive social interaction support, but not by affectionate or emotional/informational support only.

The study was published in the journal *Multiple Sclerosis and Related Disorders*, and written with co-authors Lauren Zaeske of the School of Education & Human Sciences at KU; Rebecca Ludwig, Sara Baker,

Sharon Lynch, Amanda Thuringer and Catherine Siengsukon of KU Medical Center; and Jared Bruce of the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

The findings show the importance of social support and maintenance of social connections for people with MS, especially during a global pandemic. Poor sleep has long been linked to worse cognitive functioning and physical health. The results also examined anxiety and depression and found they were not predictors of sleep quality in context of social support and its role in sleep.

"That shows social support can really serve as that protective factor and the importance of what types of support we can form socially," Harris said. "The pandemic has changed, and we don't know what will happen in the future, but we can say, 'Whatever happens, the impact of [social support](#) to our sleep is important. Everyone sleeps."

From a medical and academic standpoint, the study also lends support to the importance of psychosocial constructs, such as everyday social interactions, and how they should be considered as part of holistic treatment for everyone. Taylor, who has conducted sleep quality research in other settings, including with nurses and parents, said she hopes to assess social supports and sleep quality in people with other [chronic illnesses](#) in the future as part of a larger body of research in the connections among psychosocial factors, sleep and health.

"I think this study shows that we really need to make more time and space for social interactions, because they have such an impact on our [sleep](#) quality," Harris said. "This is especially true for people with MS who may face additional hurdles for social interactions amid a global pandemic. It can be as simple as scheduling more time with friends. In a world where social settings have to be limited, how can we address that and make sure people have the supports they need, beyond just

appointments and treatments?"

More information: Lauren Zaeske et al, Social support predicts sleep quality in people with multiple sclerosis during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Multiple Sclerosis and Related Disorders* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.msard.2022.103970](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.msard.2022.103970)

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