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With a little help from your friends

Research now confirms what common sense has been telling us all along – a repeat prescription of good friends combined with a large dose of sociability can help us live longer. Numerous studies measuring the connection between human interaction and human health point to the fact that having strong social ties may be as significant for

5 a long and healthy life as not smoking. On the other hand, a lack of friends can be just as harmful to one's health as negative lifestyle factors such as heavy drinking, obesity, or not getting enough exercise. What is more, findings show that the effect is not limited to any one group as the studies included both men and women of all ages and from all walks of life.

10 One explanation for this so-called 'friends effect' is that caring for and about others can apparently encourage us to take better care of ourselves and take fewer risks with our health and safety. Being in regular, face-to-face contact with a close-knit circle of friends also provides psychological support and a sense of well-being, which in turn can reduce stress and boost the immune system.

15 The proven impact of social relations on health and longevity has even led researchers to urge doctors to take loneliness as seriously as physical illnesses such as diabetes. This is particularly important in the case of the elderly. In fact, some studies claim that having friends around in old age can do more for life expectancy than having relatives close at hand. These benefits may be partly attributable to the fact that although people

20 can't choose their family members, they can choose their friends.

Questions for your partners

- 1 Do you have a large circle of friends?
What role do they play in your life?
- 2 Is your lifestyle as healthy as it could be?
What changes could you make to improve it?

