

# How Social Networks Influence Health

## Why is this study needed?

Evidence suggests that our social networks play an important role in our lives. They influence our daily activities and habits that are important to health, such as whether we exercise and smoke. We explored whether people have individuals within their network who they interact with about health matters which we called a “health” network. This study examined whether there is a relationship between health network characteristics and risk factors for disease like heart attack and stroke.

## Who was involved?

2975 participants were drawn from the ECHORN cohort in Barbados, Trinidad, and Puerto Rico and from the U.S. Virgin Islands of St. Thomas and St. Croix using random digit sampling. Eligible participants were English or Spanish-speaking community-dwelling adults 40 years of age and older, who were residents of the island for at least 10 years, and who intended to live on-island for the next five years.

## What were the study results?

- In the Caribbean, health networks were mainly made up of family members and not physicians or health professionals.
- Individuals with large social network were found to be more physically active.
- Individuals with larger networks were more likely to seek health screening and diagnosis.

Citation: Oladele CR, Thompson TA, Wang K, Galusha D, Tran E, Martinez-Brockman JL, Adams OP, Maharaj RG, Nazario CM, Nunez M., Nunez-Smith M. Egocentric health networks and cardiovascular risk factors in the ECHORN cohort study. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 35(3), 784-791 (March 2020).

## Takeaway Message

*In the Caribbean, family members play an integral role in health-related behaviors and decisions. The results of this study suggest the need for future health interventions in the Caribbean to take on more community-based approaches that involve family members.*

