

New study of Jewish men links heart health with religious lifestyle

Israeli Haredi men had a much lower chance of dying from heart disease than their agnostic peers

By [Adam Kovac](#) November 30, 2022



Jews worried about their heart health may want to start praying – a new study found Haredi Israeli men were less likely to die of coronary heart disease than their agnostic countrymen. Photo by iStock/Kubra Covus

A recent study may hold a clue for Jews looking to reduce their chances of dying from coronary heart disease: Start praying.

The study looked at mortality rates for nearly 12,000 Israeli Jewish men who scientists divided into five categories of religious observance: Haredim, religious, traditional, secular and agnostic. It drew on a survey that tracked these men, between the ages of 40 and 65, for more than three decades.

The [results](#), published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, [indicated](#) that the level of religious observance among the men significantly correlated to levels of mortality from heart disease. Men in the Haredi group had a 32% lower chance of dying from heart disease than those in

the agnostic group, while the religious, traditional and secular groups had odds of dying from that disease decrease by 18%, 15% and 8%, respectively.

Heart disease is the [leading cause of death](#) for both men and women in the United States, accounting for around 1 out of 5 deaths. In 2020, just under 700,000 Americans died due to complications from the disease.

Though data from the study was not collected after 1995, co-author Sigal Eilat-Adar, a registered nutritionist and epidemiologist at Israel's Academic College at Wingate, said other studies indicate the results would be similar with more recent data.

While the findings are consistent with previous studies linking increased religious observance among other religious groups to better heart health, the fact that Israeli Haredim are, on the whole, worse off economically than the other religious groups made the findings that much starker. Socioeconomic status has been widely shown to have a strong connection to overall health.

Eilat-Adar also noted that Haredim also tended to have a worse diet than the other groups, especially at the time of the study, when many indulged in meals filled with saturated fats.

“They eat a lot. There are the Holy Days and the Shabbat,” she said. “I wouldn't say it is a healthy diet, because they drink a lot of sugary drinks.”

A Haredi edge?

In the study, Eilat-Adar pointed to several factors that could explain the lower mortality rate, including that Haredim are likely to smoke less due to Shabbat restrictions and had strong community bonds and support. While the study notes that research has shown religiosity has been connected to lower stress levels, Eilat-Adar told the *Forward* that might be even more apparent in Israel, where Haredim don't have the stress that comes with mandatory military service.

Zachary Zimmer, a professor at Mount Saint Vincent University who has written extensively on the relationship between religion and health, said the habits highlighted in the study have been observed in other religious communities, where they also have been found to contribute to lower heart disease mortality.

“There’s a spiritual aspect to it, there’s a religious identity aspect to it, there’s sort of a cultural and community aspect to it, there’s a behavioral aspect to it,” he said.

But, he added, the findings are not universal.

“If you go around the world to other places, in other countries, you don’t necessarily find the same relationship” because the religion and culture introduce other factors that may influence heart health. “It may be that religiosity is not as salutary as it is in certain communities and in certain countries.”

A host of factors can lead people who are more observant to having healthier hearts, but the actual mechanisms connecting cause and effect are still poorly understood, said Ananya Banerjee, an assistant professor at Montreal’s McGill University who studies social determinants of health.

“There’s aspects of religion that can be abstract and hard to measure,” she said. “I think that’s the reason why there isn’t a huge program of research or an institution that is really looking at how protective religion and being religious is in chronic diseases and mental health conditions.”

(For Jews specifically, part of the answer for the reduced risk of dying from heart disease could be an unexpected one: A [2018 study](#) found that wearing tefillin had a positive effect on blood flow.)

Caveats

Eilat-Adar acknowledged the study’s limitations. Chief among them is that the data came from a survey of employed Israelis and therefore could not take into account the sizable population of Haredim who dedicate themselves to studying Torah full time.

As for whether secular Jews can benefit from becoming more observant, Zimmer said the health benefits of belief are clear, but not limited to organized religion. He noted that similarly positive results have been observed in people who devote themselves to non-denominational spirituality or to a musical instrument or a cause.

Eilat-Adar said that a bond with something greater than yourself can only be beneficial.

“Believing in something really helps you. You don’t have to pray. You can pray in your heart, I don’t know,” she said. “But believing in something, it’s not the attendance to the prayer. It’s the spirituality that helps you.”

Asked whether some kind of divine intervention can be at play — that Jews who prayed for good health received it due to their devotion, for example — Zimmer said the question falls outside the scope of scientific research.

“I find that divine intervention and science don’t often mix that well,” he said.