

Health

CAPSULE

## Idle chatter? Hardly



Talking to someone may help keep mental faculties sharp.

By Susan Brink, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer  
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YOU stop at the mailbox and bump into the guy down the hall. Or you pull into the driveway just as your neighbor is getting home. Suddenly you're gabbing about nothing in particular, and you end up frittering away 10 minutes. It's not a waste of time, according to research to be published in the February 2008 issue of the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. Ten minutes of talking, face to face or by phone, improves memory and boosts intellectual performance as much as doing crossword puzzles.

A team led by University of Michigan psychologist Oscar Ybarra asked more than 3,500 people ages 24 to 96 about their social interactions and tested their working memories. Regardless of age, the more social contact, the higher the level of mental function. The researchers also split 76 college students into three groups. One group had a 10-minute discussion, one spent 10 solitary minutes doing intellectual exercises (such as reading comprehension) and the third, in isolation, watched 10 minutes of "Seinfeld." On follow-up cognitive tests, the social interaction and intellectual exercise groups did better than "Seinfeld" viewers. The chit-chatters did just as well as the intellectual group.

"There's a widespread belief in this culture that the way to maintain your sharpness is to do technical and intellectual activities," Ybarra says. But this study suggests an alternative to Sudoku or crosswords could be simply talking to one another.

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