

Aging well with a hoe, spade

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People older than 62 who have an allotment garden are significantly more healthy than people without an allotment. In general, people of all ages with an allotment get more physical exercise. This was confirmed by research conducted by Agnes van den Berg and recently published in *Environmental Health*.

The Netherlands has 240,000 allotment gardens, spread over some 1,000 complexes and parks. The allotment garden is a by-product of 18th century industrialization and the subsequent migration to the cities. Allotments were rented to factory workers with meagre wages thus enabling them able to grow their own vegetables and fruits. Today, allotment tending is primarily a form of outdoors recreation. Yet there is increasing policy interest in the health-enhancing effects of tending allotments, although such [health benefits](#) were never the subject of

formal research. That has now changed with the Wageningen UR study.

Some 121 allotment tenders took part in the research, with 63 of their neighbours without an allotment serving as the control group. "In the summer allotment gardeners spend on average 32 hours per week at their allotment, making them much more physically active than their neighbors without an allotment," according to Van den Berg. "They rode a bicycle to the garden and were active battling weeds with a hoe and spade. For half of them, this active life-style was also a very important reason for having the allotment."

While these conclusions sound logical, the researchers nonetheless turned up a surprise. Allotment gardeners younger than 62 appeared not to differ at all from their neighbors without an allotment in terms of health and wellbeing. In older allotment gardeners there was a clear difference. "But," cautions Van den Berg, "you have to consider that older people who were unable to continue their gardening therefore fell outside of the selection. Also, the control group was somewhat younger, better educated and economically better off than the older group, so on average they were probably healthier. That makes interpreting the evidence from this study more difficult. I suspect that with more comparable groups we would have found that both younger and older gardeners are healthier and happier than their non-gardening neighbours. Reason enough then for government to encourage creation of complexes of allotment gardens, especially in light of the aging population."

More information: Read more about 'Allotment Gardening and Health' by Agnes van den Berg, et al: www.ehjournal.net/content/9/1/74

Provided by Wageningen University

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