

Volunteering reduces risk of hypertension in older adults, research shows

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Carnegie Mellon University
Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences

It turns out that helping others can also help you protect yourself from high blood pressure. New research from Carnegie Mellon University shows that older adults who volunteer for at least 200 hours per year decrease their risk of hypertension, or high blood pressure, by 40 percent. The study, published by the American Psychological Association's *Psychology and Aging* journal, suggests that volunteer work may be an effective non-pharmaceutical option to help prevent the condition. Hypertension affects an estimated 65 million Americans and is a major contributor to cardiovascular disease, the leading cause of death in the US. Credit: Carnegie Mellon University

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"Everyday, we are learning more about how negative [lifestyle factors](#) like [poor diet](#) and lack of exercise increase hypertension risk," said Rodlescia S. Sneed, a Ph.D. candidate in psychology in CMU's Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences and lead author of the study. "Here, we wanted to determine if a positive lifestyle factor like volunteer work could actually reduce disease risk. And, the results give older adults an example of something that they can actively do to remain healthy and age successfully."

For the study, Sneed and Carnegie Mellon's Sheldon Cohen studied 1,164 adults between the ages of 51 and 91 from across the U.S. The participants were interviewed twice, in 2006 and 2010, and all had [normal blood pressure](#) levels at the first interview. Volunteerism, various social and psychological factors, and blood pressure were measured each time.

The results showed that those who reported at least 200 hours of volunteer work during the initial interview were 40 percent less likely to develop hypertension than those who did not volunteer when evaluated four years later. The specific type of volunteer activity was not a factor—only the amount of time spent volunteering led to increased protection from hypertension.

"As people get older, social transitions like retirement, bereavement and

the departure of children from the home often leave older adults with fewer natural opportunities for social interaction," Sneed said.

"Participating in volunteer activities may provide older adults with social connections that they might not have otherwise. There is strong evidence that having good social connections promotes healthy aging and reduces risk for a number of negative health outcomes."

More information: www.psy.cmu.edu/people/sneed.html

Provided by Carnegie Mellon University

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