

Researchers study the effects of work on aging

March 25 2014, by Chris Defrancesco

Work, and the toll it takes on us as we age, is the focus of a group of UConn Health researchers wrapping up a study of the aging workforce.

The Center for the Promotion of Health in the New England Workplace (CPH-NEW) at UConn Health, led by Dr. Martin Cherniack, professor of medicine, is pulling data from a prospective—meaning it follows a group of people over time—study of more than 1,000 employees working in manufacturing jobs in Connecticut.

"There is nothing quite like this nationally and we are trying to find a funding agency that will take interest in a longer-term maintenance of this group through their working years and into retirement," Cherniack says. "Perhaps the most interesting finding has been the effect of the economy from 2008 to 2013 on an aging workforce. The effects are very large and not studied."

A study that started five and a half years ago, coinciding with the 2008 economic downturn, found a dramatic increase in perceived psychological strain and apprehension about family finances. Physical demands were found to be largely unchanged.

In a study of job insecurity, defined as a perceived threat to the continuance of employment, data show adverse effects on retirement expectations as well as [work](#) stress, work performance, sleep quality, and [health](#)-related sleep difficulty.

Other areas include:

Measuring the work environment's "social resources" (civility and support from supervisors and coworkers), their influence on workers' well-being, and whether [age](#) is a factor.

Comparing how old a worker feels compared to his or her true age, categorized by gender and age group over a three-year period, to lead to further analysis considering work demands, work conditions, non-work conditions and health.

Assessing effects of work and non-work factors on age-related changes in musculoskeletal function and health using surveys and physical testing, the goal being to determine reference values for physical performance measures. This study is published in the journal Human Factors.

Cherniack says the research was designed to identify patterns of adverse health in early middle age that would predict early disability and health related retirement. What it's uncovered so far suggests that, in addition to further study, there are specific interventions that can be directed to at-risk members of the middle age and older working population.

"This information remains central to targeted preventive health interventions," he says. "What we did not anticipate was the rapid and profound changes in attitude among older Connecticut workers, characterized by uncertainty over working conditions and uncertainty over economic well-being and health care. We also did not anticipate the high level of eldercare obligations and its physical cost in this group. What we don't know is whether these patterns will persist and whether it will translate into poorer health for the middle class."

More information: Mark Cote, Anne Kenny, Jeffrey Dussetschleger,

Dana Farr, Ashok Chaurasia, and Martin Cherniack. "Reference Values for Physical Performance Measures in the Aging Working Population." *Human Factors: The Journal of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society* February 2014 56: 228-242, [DOI: 10.1177/0018720813518220](https://doi.org/10.1177/0018720813518220)

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