

Working and volunteering could reduce disablement in seniors, study finds

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Working or volunteering can reduce the chances of chronic health conditions leading to physical disability in older Americans, according to researchers at Georgia State University and Florida State University.

The study found people ages 50 to 64 who worked full-time or part-time or volunteered up to 100 hours per year experienced a reduction in the extent to which chronic conditions were associated with subsequent [functional limitations](#), such as the ability to walk a block or climb a flight of stairs. The findings are published in *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*.

Previous studies have not examined how working or volunteering affects functional limitations, said Ben Lennox Kail, lead author and assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at Georgia State.

"If we can find interventions that slow down early-stage disability, we might be able to help people live healthier and ultimately longer because decreased [physical functioning](#) is associated with excess risk of mortality," Kail said. "What we're arguing is that it's important to have programs that incentivize people who are healthy enough to continue working and volunteering to do so because it can intervene in health processes."

Maintaining high levels of physical functioning is one of the keys to successful aging. In the United States, nearly 20 percent of men and 30 percent of women older than 65 years old experience some form of

functional limitation. Limiting disability is important to help reduce mortality in the U.S., as well as individual and public health expenditures.

"A lot of our programs are about labor force withdrawal," Kail said. "Social Security and Medicare provide incentives to leave the labor force. For lots of people, these are great and important. At the same time, if we want people to age healthier than normal, we need incentives for them to continue working or begin volunteering."

The researchers used Health and Retirement Survey data from 1998 to 2012. The data were collected from 13,268 people older than 50 and younger than 62, who were re-interviewed every two years.

The data include measurements of subsequent functional limitations: walking one block, climbing one flight of stairs, stooping or kneeling, lifting or carrying 10 pounds, picking a dime up off the ground and pushing or pulling a large object. Participants indicated whether they had ever been diagnosed with any of the following chronic conditions: high blood pressure, diabetes, cancer, lung disease, heart problems, stroke or arthritis.

In addition, they reported whether they were engaged in full-time or part-time work over the past year, as well as the number of hours they volunteered during the same period.

The study found working full-time and part-time or volunteering less than 100 hours per year played a significant role in lessening the link between chronic conditions and functional limitations. Workers and volunteers had fewer current physical limitations than their non-active counterparts. On average, they also had fewer chronic conditions.

Volunteering 100 hours or more didn't reduce the association between

[chronic conditions](#) and subsequent functional limitations, but it was important in limiting functional limitations.

"Some older people are leaving the [labor force](#) and not replacing it with anything," Kail said. "If you're not replacing work with a work-like activity, your retirement is radically different than how you spent most of your life and not necessarily radically better."

Dawn Carr of Florida State was a co-author of the study.

More information: Ben Lennox Kail et al. Successful Aging in the Context of the Disablement Process: Working and Volunteering as Moderators on the Association Between Chronic Conditions and Subsequent Functional Limitations, *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* (2016). [DOI: 10.1093/geronb/gbw060](#)

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