

Volunteering can reduce dementia risk in seniors, study finds

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Yannick Griep, assistant professor in the University of Calgary's Department of Psychology, led a five-year study that shows regular volunteering reduces the chance of dementia in seniors. Credit: Riley Brandt, University of Calgary

Seniors now have a greater incentive than ever for doing volunteer work in their retirement years, in light of a new study that shows volunteering can substantially reduce the development of dementia.

The study, led by University of Calgary psychology professor Yannick Griep and published in the medical journal *PLOS One*, tracks 1,001

Swedish citizens, all of whom retired in 2010, over a five-year period, monitoring them for the development of [cognitive problems](#).

These retirees are divided into three groups based on their engagement in volunteer [work](#). One group is made up of individuals who consistently volunteered in their respective communities for at least one hour per week. The second group consists of those who sporadically engaged in volunteering. In the third group are retired workers who never engaged in volunteering.

The cognitive health of those individuals is assessed at regular intervals (in 2010, 2012 and 2014) by means of questionnaires as well as the monitoring of physician diagnoses, including the use of anti-[dementia](#) medication. The questionnaires touch on such factors as memory and the ability to concentrate and make clear decisions, among other cognitive issues.

Regular volunteer work provides cognitive health benefits

"We found that the people who did volunteer work for at least one hour a week on a regular basis were 2.44 times less likely to develop dementia than the seniors who didn't volunteer," says Griep.

Volunteer work in the study is defined as an activity done out of free will for no monetary compensation. Moreover, Griep clarifies that "the activity has to benefit others who are not your core family; for example, helping out a church, a school, a library a homeless shelter or some sort of charity organization."

Interestingly, Griep and his co-researchers found that the middle group—those retirees who only volunteered sporadically—did not

receive any benefits to their cognitive health. "We discovered that for this group there are no differences than with the group that never volunteered," he says.

Griep can only speculate why there are no [cognitive health](#) benefits for the sporadic volunteer camp but he believes it's because they don't receive "the latent benefits of work," as do the regular volunteers. "Work has many benefits beyond just a paycheque," he says.

"It brings a structure to the day, like when we need to be up at seven and at the office for 8:30. It offers social contact with people outside of our family. It brings us the social status we get with a job title. It makes us feel like we're making a meaningful contribution to society. And there's a physical aspect as well, even if it's just walking from your house to the spot where you do your volunteer work.

Researchers strongly recommend retirees volunteer at least once a week

"If you volunteer regularly, it starts to feel like a regular job and you get these benefits of work," Griep explains. The underlying assumption, he says, is that those in the regular volunteering camp stay sharper cognitively because they are continuing to engage their minds in these key ways.

Based on the findings, Griep and his team strongly recommend that retired seniors do [volunteer](#) work at least once a week.

"This is an important issue," says Griep. "As a senior, your risk of dementia goes up substantially every year. Anything you can do that's low cost and easy to implement that will reduce the likelihood of developing dementia is invaluable. It's not only beneficial for the health-

care system but also for those individuals who might develop dementia, as well as the family members who wind up caring for them."

More information: Yannick Griep et al. Can volunteering in later life reduce the risk of dementia? A 5-year longitudinal study among volunteering and non-volunteering retired seniors, *PLOS ONE* (2017).
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