

Regular volunteer work provides demonstrable benefits for the health and well-being of older adults

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A new study in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, published by Elsevier, takes a closer look at the benefits of volunteering to the health and well-being of volunteers, both validating and refuting findings

from previous research. The results verify that adults over 50 who volunteer for at least 100 hours a year (about two hours per week) have a substantially reduced risk of mortality and developing physical limitations, higher levels of subsequent physical activity, and improved sense of well-being later on compared to individuals who do not volunteer.

"Humans are [social creatures](#) by nature. Perhaps this is why our minds and bodies are rewarded when we give to others. Our results show that volunteerism among older adults doesn't just strengthen communities, but enriches our own lives by strengthening our bonds to others, helping us feel a sense of purpose and well-being, and protecting us from feelings of loneliness, depression, and hopelessness. Regular altruistic activity reduces our risk of death even though our study didn't show any direct impact on a wide array of chronic conditions," explained lead investigator Eric S. Kim, Ph.D., Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences and Lee Kum Sheung Center for Health and Happiness, Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Boston; and Human Flourishing Program, Institute for Quantitative Social Science, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.

A growing body of research has linked volunteering to many health and well-being benefits, but there is still insufficient evidence to demonstrate the consistent and specific positive outcomes that are needed to develop public health interventions based on volunteerism. This large-scale study helps address this gap by evaluating 34 physical health and psychological/social well-being outcomes. This permitted direct comparisons of the potential size of effect that volunteering might have on various outcomes and also learn which outcomes volunteering does not appear to be influencing.

The study did not confirm links between volunteering and improvements to [chronic conditions](#) such as diabetes, hypertension, stroke, cancer,

[heart disease](#), lung disease, arthritis, obesity, cognitive impairment, or chronic pain.

The analysis was based on data, face-to-face interviews, and survey responses from nearly 13,000 participants randomly selected from the Health and Retirement Study (HRS), a nationally representative sample of older adults in the United States. The participants were tracked over four years in two cohorts from 2010-2016.

The growing older adult population possesses a vast array of skills and experiences that can be leveraged for the greater good of society via volunteering. While proposing further research to better understand this phenomena, the study recommends the adoption of policies that encourage more volunteerism. Such interventions could simultaneously enhance society and foster a trajectory of healthy aging in the rapidly growing population of older adults. Further study is also needed to learn the underlying reasons for the divergence in some of the results from previous research.

A cautionary note is that these conclusions were drawn prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic, which makes social activity risky and unadvisable for the foreseeable future, However, Dr. Kim noted that "now might be a particular moment in history when society needs your service the most. If you are able to do so while abiding by health guidelines, you not only can help to heal and repair the world, but you can help yourself as well. When the COVID-19 crisis finally subsides, we have a chance to create policies and civic structures that enable more giving in society. Some cities were already pioneering this idea before the pandemic and quarantine, and I hope we have the willingness and resolve to do so in a post-COVID-19 society as well."

More information: Eric S. Kim et al, Volunteering and Subsequent Health and Well-Being in Older Adults: An Outcome-Wide Longitudinal

Approach, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.amepre.2020.03.004](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2020.03.004)

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