

# Social participation promotes optimal aging in older adults, research shows

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A new study followed more than 7,000 middle aged and older Canadians for approximately three years to understand whether higher rates of social participation were associated with successful aging in later life.

They found that those who participated in volunteer work and those participating in recreational activities were more likely to maintain excellent health across the subsequent three-year study period and less likely to develop physical, cognitive, mental, or emotional problems.

The researchers defined successful aging as freedom from any serious physical, cognitive, mental, or emotional conditions that prevent daily activities, as well as high levels of self-reported happiness, good physical health, and [mental health](#). The researchers only included participants who were successfully aging at the start of the study. The goal was to see whether [social participation](#) was associated with the likelihood that they would maintain excellent health.

Approximately 72% of these respondents who participated in volunteer or [recreational activities](#) at the start of the study were still aging successfully three years later. However, only two-thirds of those who were not participating in these activities were aging successfully at the end of the study. After taking into account a wide range of sociodemographic characteristics, the findings indicated that respondents who participated in recreational activities and volunteer or charity work were 15% and 17% more likely to maintain excellent health across the study, respectively.

"Although the study's observational nature prohibits the determination of causality, it makes intuitive sense that [social activity](#) is associated with successful aging," says first author, Mabel Ho, a doctoral candidate at the University of Toronto's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work (FIFSW) and the Institute of Life Course and Aging. "Being socially active is important no matter how old we are. Feeling connected and engaged can boost our mood, reduce our sense of loneliness and isolation, and improve our mental health and overall health."

Some [medical professionals](#) are now prescribing [social activities](#) for

their patients, called 'social prescribing', a non-pharmacological intervention that integrates primary care with community services. Social prescribing can be used to encourage older adults to engage in volunteering and recreational activities.

"It is encouraging that there are ways to support our physical, cognitive, mental, and emotional well-being as we age. This is wonderful news for older adults and their families who may anticipate that precipitous decline is inevitable with age," says senior author Esme Fuller-Thomson, Director of the Institute for Life Course & Aging and Professor at the University of Toronto's Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. "It is important for older adults, families, practitioners, policymakers, and researchers to work together to create an environment that supports a vibrant and healthy later life."

The modified concept of successful aging introduced in this study is more inclusive than earlier studies and encompasses both objective and subjective measures of optimal aging. Most previous research on successful aging classified those with any chronic health conditions as not "aging successfully". In the current study, respondents could still be classified as "aging successfully" if they had chronic illness, as long as they can engage in various [daily activities](#) and are free of disabling chronic pain. The revised definition also incorporates older adults' subjective perception of their aging process, physical health and mental health, as well as their self-reported emotional well-being such as happiness and life satisfaction. Most earlier studies had ignored the [older adults'](#) subjective experience of aging.

The study was published online in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. It uses [longitudinal data](#) from the baseline wave (2011-2015) and the first follow-up wave (2015-2018) of data from the Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging (CLSA) to examine factors associated with optimal aging. The CLSA included

7,651 respondents who were aged 60 years or older at wave 2 who were in optimal health during the baseline wave of data collection. The sample was restricted to those who were in excellent health at baseline, which was only 45% of the respondents.

**More information:** Mabel Ho et al, Is Social Participation Associated with Successful Aging among Older Canadians? Findings from the Canadian Longitudinal Study on Aging (CLSA), *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph20126058](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20126058)

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