

Volunteering in late life may protect the brain against cognitive decline and dementia

July 20 2023



Seniors stay active at the UC Davis Arboretum Nursery, July 18, 2023. Credit: UC Davis Health

Volunteering in late life is associated with better cognitive function—specifically, better executive function and episodic memory.

Those are the findings of a new study from UC Davis Health presented today (July 20) at the Alzheimer's Association International Conference 2023 in Amsterdam.

"We hope these new data encourage individuals of all ages and backgrounds to engage in local volunteering—not only to benefit their communities, but potentially their own cognitive and brain health," said Donna McCullough, Alzheimer's Association chief mission and field operations officer.

Volunteer activities—such as supporting educational, religious, health-related or other charitable organizations—allow older adults to be more physically active, increase [social interaction](#) and provide cognitive stimulation that may protect the brain. However, there has been a lack of information on the relationship between volunteering and cognitive function, especially in large, diverse populations.

Yi Lor, an epidemiology doctoral student at UC Davis, and Rachel Whitmer, the study's principal investigator, examined volunteering habits among an ethnic and racially diverse population of 2,476 older adults. The participants are in the Kaiser Healthy Aging and Diverse Life Experiences Study (KHANDLE) and the Study of Healthy Aging in African Americans (STAR).

The [study group](#) had an average age of 74 and contained 48% Black, 20% white, 17% Asian and 14% Latino participants. A total of 1,167 (43%) of the participants reported volunteering in the past year.

The researchers found that volunteering was associated with better baseline scores on tests of executive function and verbal episodic memory. This was true even after adjusting for age, sex, education, income, practice effects and interview mode (phone versus in-person).

Those who volunteered several times per week had the highest levels of executive function.

"Volunteering may be important for better cognition in late life and could serve as a simple intervention in all [older adults](#) to protect against risk for Alzheimer's disease and associated dementias," Lor said. "Our next steps are to examine whether volunteering is protective against [cognitive impairment](#), and how physical and [mental health](#) may impact this relationship."

Volunteering was also associated with a trend toward less [cognitive decline](#) over the follow-up time of 1.2 years, but this association did not reach statistical significance.

"You're not in control of your family history or age—you can't turn back the clock. But you are in control of how you spend your day and life," Whitmer said. "Volunteering is about keeping your [brain](#) active. It's also about socializing, which keeps you engaged and happy, and potentially lowers stress."

More information: Conference: aaic.alz.org/

Provided by UC Davis

Citation: Volunteering in late life may protect the brain against cognitive decline and dementia (2023, July 20) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-07-volunteering-late-life-brain-cognitive.html>

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