

Doctor Who festive specials linked to lower death rates

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A new "Doctor Who" episode shown during the festive period,

especially on Christmas Day, is associated with lower death rates in the subsequent year across the UK, finds a study published in the Christmas issue of *The BMJ*.

The findings highlight the positive effect doctors can have when working during the festive period and may prompt the BBC and Disney+ to broadcast new episodes of Doctor Who every festive period, ideally on Christmas Day, says the author.

Sixty years ago, the BBC televised the first episode of Doctor Who, following a character called the Doctor, who travels through space and time in the TARDIS fighting villains and intervening to save lives. The show became a cultural phenomenon, and today millions of viewers still follow it worldwide.

In the UK, many doctors work over the festive period, but the impact of this on [population health](#) is unclear.

Because Doctor Who has been broadcast for 60 years, it provides a natural experiment to investigate the impact that one doctor could have when working over the festive period.

To explore this further, Richard Riley, Professor of Biostatistics at the University of Birmingham, examined the association between new Doctor Who episodes aired from 24 December to 1 January—a potential proxy for a single doctor working during that period—and the subsequent year's age standardized [death rates](#) from the UK's Office for National Statistics.

Only new televised episodes from 1963 were considered. Televised spin-off series, books, comics, and audio stories were not included.

Between 1963 and 2022 a new Doctor Who episode was broadcast

during 31 festive periods, including 14 episodes shown on Christmas Day. Thirteen of the 14 Christmas Day episodes were consecutive from 2005 to 2017.

In time series analyses, an association was found between broadcasts during the festive period and subsequent lower annual [death](#) rates.

In particular, episodes shown on Christmas Day were associated with about six fewer deaths per 10,000 person years in England and Wales and four fewer deaths per 10,000 person years in the UK.

The reduction was even higher when Doctor Who was consistently shown over the festive periods from 2005 to 2019, mainly on Christmas Day, with an average seven fewer deaths per 10,000 person years in England and Wales and six fewer deaths per 10,000 person years in the UK.

Riley points out that these findings do not show causality and relate to one unique doctor, so may not apply to all medical doctors in the human race. However, the analysis took account of population differences over time and he suggests that watching a doctor who is caring for people, "could encourage health seeking behavior."

These findings reinforce why health care provision should not be taken for granted, writes Riley.

He believes that [decision makers](#) at the BBC and Disney+ (the international broadcaster of new episodes) should reach enlightenment from the study's findings owing to a possible health benefit of watching Doctor Who.

Also, assuming the findings generalize beyond the UK, Disney+ has the opportunity to reduce [mortality rates](#) worldwide if it streams new Doctor

Who episodes during the festive period, he concludes.

This has to be a chance finding, but maybe there is truth in the notion that providing kind, thoughtful, timely health care, free at the point of need, to those who need assistance, really can make a difference, say researchers in a linked editorial.

The Doctor in Doctor Who represents the best of everyone who works in [health care](#), they add, and probably inspired many people to make better choices and live better lives, both on screen and off screen.

And they suggest that while [health professionals](#) work this Christmas, six decades after the clattering opening of a police box in a junkyard in London, they can look at each small beautiful action they make and say "we're saving lives" and "we've got a paper to cite to prove it."

More information: Effect of a doctor working during the festive period on population health: natural experiment using sixty years of Doctor Who episodes (the TARDIS study), *The BMJ* (2023). [DOI: 10.1136/bmj-2023-077143](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj-2023-077143)

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