

Seniors who keep working are healthier, study says

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Credit: Peter Griffin/public domain

Is retirement hazardous to your health? It's an intriguing question in light of a new study that finds senior citizens who work are in better health than their counterparts who don't.

Researchers from the University of Miami and their colleagues examined data on more than 83,000 Americans who participated in the National Health Interview Survey between 1997 and 2011. All of them were at least 65 years old when they were interviewed, and 13 percent of them were still working part time or full time. The majority of these workers - 61 percent - held white-collar positions.

Compared to people with white-collar jobs, those who were unemployed or retired were 2.75 times more likely to report their health as "poor" or "fair." (The other options were "good," "very good" or "excellent.") People with blue-collar jobs, service-industry jobs or who worked on farms rated their health as about the same as their white-collar peers.

The survey also rated health using a measure called the Health and Activities Limitation Index, or

HALex, which includes factors like whether people need help taking care of themselves or have limitations in the kind of work they can do. The 80 percent of people with the highest HALex scores were considered to be in good shape, compared with the 20 percent of people who had the lowest scores.

The researchers found that unemployed and retired [senior citizens](#) were nearly six times more likely than the white-collar workers to have a low HALex score. Again, other types of workers scored about the same as white-collar workers.

Older Americans with jobs also fared better on more objective measures of health. For instance, the National Health Interview Survey included information on whether people had ever been diagnosed with serious conditions like cancer, diabetes and heart disease. Compared to those with white-collar jobs, those who were unemployed or retired were 49 percent more likely to have a history of at least two of these health problems.

By this measure, blue-collar workers were in even [better health](#) than white-collar workers: They were 16 percent less likely to have two or more of these [health problems](#).

Finally, interviewers asked whether people needed any assistance or special equipment to do things like stand, walk or climb stairs. Unemployed and retired seniors were 88 percent more likely than white-collar workers to have multiple functional limitations, researchers found. In addition, the odds of having two or more limitations were 16 percent lower for blue-collar workers and 18 percent lower for service workers.

"Being unemployed/retired was associated with the greatest risk of poor health across all health status measures, even after controlling for smoking status, obesity, and other predictors of health," the study authors concluded.

The results don't show that working past retirement age is what made senior citizens with jobs healthier than their non-working peers. Indeed, the authors acknowledged that the reverse is often true: Health problems force some people to drop out of the workforce.

Still, understanding the [health](#) benefits associated with working past age 65 could motivate businesses to find ways to accommodate older [workers](#), even if they have some limitations, researchers wrote.

The report was published Thursday in the journal *Preventing Chronic Disease*, a publication of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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