Volunteering improves the physical and mental health of older volunteers

There are increasing numbers of older adults who no longer work. Volunteering has the double benefit of the activity for these adults and the value of the services they provide as volunteers. The evidence suggests that volunteering improves the physical and mental health of volunteers, notably a reduction in mortality. The evidence is inconclusive for other outcomes because of the small number of studies.

What is this review about?

The increasing imbalance between the number of older adults not working and the number of adults in the age range of labour force participation is a fundamental public policy challenge in high-income countries. Retiring may carry the risk of a fast decline in health.

Volunteering can play a significant role in people’s lives as they transition from work to retirement. Volunteering may contribute to individuals ageing well and society ageing well because volunteering by older adults relieves a societal burden while helping these volunteers to maintain health and functionality.

This review examines the evidence of impact of volunteering on the physical and mental health of older people who volunteer.

What studies are included?

Included studies had to examine the impact of formal volunteering by people aged 65 or over on their physical and mental health. Studies had to have a comparison group.

Ninety studies analysing 47 different populations were identified. Of these, only 26 studies, analysing 19 different populations, could be used in the data synthesis. The studies were from Australia, Ireland, Israel, Japan, Korea and USA. Three were randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and 21 were non-randomised studies. The studies contained data for over 47,000 volunteers.
What is the effect of volunteering on the physical and mental health of older people?

Volunteering improves the physical and mental health of volunteers. The effect is best documented for mortality, with too few studies to draw conclusions for other outcomes.

For physical health, the evidence shows that there is a positive effect on reducing mortality (10 studies) and possibly incident functional disability (3 studies). Volunteering may support the maintenance of functional competence (3 studies) and slow the decline in instrumental activities of daily living (2 studies).

For mental health, volunteering may reduce depression (3 studies).

There was no evidence of adverse effects.

In all cases, there is little variation in the estimated effects from the different studies. However, the effects are small, and except in the case of mortality, based on a small number of studies.

What do the findings of the review mean?

Voluntary work reduces the mortality hazard of volunteers aged 65 and above. The effect corresponds to a 43% chance of the volunteers dying first which should be compared to a fifty-fifty chance (50%) of dying first if the intervention had no effect. The evidence seems robust as there is little variation in findings between the studies.

As the intervention – unlike most other interventions in the social welfare area – is not costly, it could be prescribed to more older adults. In fact, contrary to carrying a cost, volunteering is a productive activity contributing directly to community well-being.

As volunteering has a positive effect on the volunteers, it probably should be prescribed universally. Given the very nature of the intervention, however, it is voluntary and cannot be prescribed. Nevertheless, measures can be taken to encourage people to engage in voluntary work by making opportunities more immediately available and visible.