

The many ways volunteering is good for your heart



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If you do volunteer work, whether it's at a school, soup kitchen, or senior center, perhaps you've experienced the emotional rewards of donating your time. What you might not realize, however, is that volunteering may offer some added advantages for your heart.

"There's a growing body of research showing that volunteering is associated with better physical and mental health outcomes," says Eric S. Kim, a research fellow at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. A **study** he co-authored, published in *Social Science and Medicine* earlier this year, found that volunteers were more likely to use preventive health care services. For instance, people who volunteered were 47% more likely to get cholesterol checks and 30% more likely to get flu shots than those who didn't volunteer. (An annual flu shot appears to lower the risk of heart attack and stroke by about one-third over the following year.)

Measurable gains

The participants were part of the Health and Retirement Study, a nationally representative study launched in 1992 that includes more than 7,100 adults over age 50. Earlier research from the same study found that people who volunteered on a regular basis (at least 200 hours a year) were less likely to develop high blood pressure over a four-year period than non-volunteers. Volunteers also had greater increases in psychological well-being and physical activity.

Another large, ongoing study of volunteerism, Baltimore Experience Corp Study, has also documented physical, social, and cognitive improvements in volunteers. Begun in 1995 and now operating in multiple cities across the United States, Experience Corps

pairs adults ages 50 or older with public school students who struggle with reading. Earlier studies have found that, compared with a control group, Experience Corps volunteers tend to walk more steps, be less depressed, find it easier to do everyday tasks, and have better thinking skills.

Why connection matters

The well-known advantages of greater social connectivity likely play a large role, says Kim. “For example, when you’re more connected to your community, it’s easier to get information on things like how to find the best deals on fresh vegetables, or where to get a free flu shot. People also provide one another emotional support.”

Another intriguing potential benefit is that volunteering may give people a greater sense of purpose in life. There are three elements to a sense of purpose: a sense of meaning, a sense of direction, and a goal to strive for, Kim explains. In recent years, research on health and longevity has expanded to focus more on these types of positive emotions.

“We know that stress, depression, and anger all have negative effects on the body, especially with regard to the risk of cardiovascular disease,” says Kim. The opposite emotions and mindsets — satisfaction and optimism — are closely linked to (but not necessarily synonymous with) a sense of purpose, he adds. Yet a sense of purpose is associated with better heart health above and beyond the effects of optimism and a positive outlook. In fact, a 2016 [report](#) in *Psychosomatic Medicine* that pooled findings from 10 different studies found that people with a high sense of purpose in life had a lower risk of having a cardiovascular event (such as a heart attack or stroke) and of dying from any cause, compared with people who had a lower sense of purpose.

You can explore a wide range of volunteer opportunities online at these organizations, which offer many different ways to give back to your community:

- **Volunteer Match** (www.volunteermatch.org) connects people with local volunteer opportunities that match their interests and expertise, with such choices as helping animals, assisting immigrants and refugees, working with computers and technology, and numerous others.
- **The Corporation for National and Community Service** (www.nationalservice.gov) is a federal agency that invests in a range of nonprofit local community organizations that mentor and tutor at-risk youth, rebuild communities struck by natural disasters, help seniors live independently, and support veterans and military families.
- **Experience Corps** (www.aarp.org/experience-corps) recruits and trains older adults to tutor children from kindergarten through third grade who are struggling to read. They work in lower-income districts in 22 cities throughout the country.