

The Wellness Express™



Jump on the train to good health

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The Positive Health Effects of Volunteering

Presented by: Total Health Systems

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Introduction

Volunteering your time and energy to a project that is meaningful to you can produce extraordinary health benefits above and beyond the sense of community and joy you get from helping others. According to a report compiled by the Corporation for National and Community Service, possible health benefits associated with volunteering include reductions in chronic pain, despair and depression following a heart attack and disability, as well as improved happiness, satisfaction and sense of control over life and physical health.¹



This report also notes that, to get the greatest health gains from volunteering you need to exceed a “volunteering threshold” of 1 to 2 hours a week per year. Though volunteering appears to be a healthful activity at any age, it is adults over the age of 60 who tend to benefit most from this pursuit, notes Rush University Medical Center.²

Your chiropractor is one of your biggest health advocates and can counsel you in depth on the many ways that volunteering can be beneficial for your physical, mental, social and emotional health.

In this edition of the Wellness Express, we will explore some of the most important health benefits associated with volunteering important health benefits associated with volunteering.

Decreased Blood Pressure

High blood pressure, or hypertension, affects about 65 million Americans and is a leading factor in cardiovascular disease - the No. 1 cause of death in the United States. Researchers from Carnegie Mellon University have found that older individuals who volunteer for no fewer than 200 hours per year reduce their risk of hypertension by a whopping 40 percent.³ This research indicates that volunteer work may be a potent natural alternative to pharmaceuticals in preventing this common health problem.

Results from this research study indicate that the *type* of volunteer activity is not what is important and that only the total amount of time spent volunteering is what contributes to a

Exercise of the Week

Seated Upper Back Extension

Difficulty: Moderate

(Consult your chiropractor before doing this or any other exercise.)

Start: Seated in a chair with a backrest that extends up to mid-back (at or around height of shoulder blades).

Exercise: both hands together, and reach arms overhead. Then, reach up and back, letting upper back bend over backrest of chair. Also bring chin up toward ceiling. Concentrate on ‘opening’ effect this stretch can have on chest and shoulders. Hold for 30-60 seconds, and then return to starting position. Repeat 2X.



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reduced risk of hypertension. The researchers believe that volunteer work helps create positive social connections, and that good social connections encourage healthy aging and protection from numerous negative health outcomes.

Reduced Risk of Depression & Anxiety

Proactively engaging in meaningful volunteer work may be an effective way to combat depression and anxiety. A 2003 study published in the journal *Social Science & Medicine* states that the access to social and psychological resources that comes with volunteering helps counter negative moods, including depression and anxiety.⁴ Another study, published in 2005 in the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, reports that formal volunteering has a beneficial effect on depression but that informal “helping” does not produce the same beneficial effects on mood.⁵ Many researchers feel that the positive health effects of volunteering on depression are due to the social integration it encourages - a particularly important aspect of volunteering, especially for elderly individuals and people who find themselves socially isolated.

Improved Social & Psychological Well-Being

Volunteering on a consistent and formal basis offers the possibility of improved social well-being to the volunteer. The National Health Service of the United Kingdom notes that volunteering may help you enhance this important aspect of overall health by improving family relationships,

meeting new people and boosting self-esteem, motivation and sense of purpose.⁶ Enhancing confidence and self-esteem is particularly important for teens and elders, who may find their volunteer experience to be an unexpected source of strength, stability and comfort in a period of rapid change. The experiences you have through volunteering can contribute to a positive self-identity and provide you with a core group of long-term friends.

Reduced Risk of Mortality

Research evidence suggests that volunteering can significantly reduce your risk of mortality. According to a 2005 article published in the *Journal of Health Psychology*, community-dwelling individuals over the age of 70 who are frequent volunteers experience significantly reduced mortality compared to non-volunteers of the same age.

In their report, the Corporation for National and Community Service notes that, even after other factors - age, health, gender - are controlled, research still finds that individuals who volunteer are more likely to live longer. One possible explanation for this is that volunteering adds valuable hours of non-exercise activity to your life. All humans require appropriate amounts of both exercise and non-exercise activity for optimal health and longevity.

Quote to Inspire

Research has shown that people who volunteer often live longer”

Allen Klein

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