



U.S. DEPARTMENT  
OF HEALTH AND  
HUMAN SERVICES



National Institute  
on Aging

## Participating in Activities You Enjoy— More Than Just Fun and Games *Tips from the National Institute on Aging*

There are many things you can do to help yourself age well: exercise and be physically active, make healthy food choices, and don't smoke. But did you know that participating in activities you enjoy may also help support healthy aging?

As people get older, they often find themselves spending more and more time at home alone. The isolation can lead to depression and is not good for your health. If you find yourself spending a lot of time alone, try adding a volunteer or social activity to your routine.

June feels great. She enjoys gardening, playing cards with friends at the senior center, and taking a water aerobics class at the county indoor pool. She turns 78 this year, but feels like she's still in her 50s. Research shows that staying active can help older adults like June stay healthy.

### **Benefits of an Active Lifestyle**

Engaging in social and productive activities you enjoy, like taking an art class or becoming a volunteer in your community or at your place of worship, may help to maintain your well-being.

Research tells us that older people with an active lifestyle:

- *Are less likely to develop certain diseases.* Participating in hobbies and other social and leisure pursuits may lower risk for developing some health problems, including dementia.
- *Have a longer lifespan.* One study showed that older adults who reported taking part in social activities (such as playing games, belonging to social groups, or traveling) or meaningful, productive activities (such as having a paid or unpaid job, or gardening) lived longer than people who did not. Researchers are further exploring this connection.
- *Are happier and less depressed.* Studies suggest that older adults who participate in what they believe are meaningful activities, like volunteering in their communities, say they feel happier and healthier. One study placed older adults from an urban community in their neighborhood public elementary schools to tutor children 15 hours a week. Volunteers reported personal satisfaction from the experience. The researchers found it improved the volunteers' cognitive and physical health, as well as the children's school success.

Researchers think it might also have long-term benefits, lowering the older adults' risk of developing disability, dependency, and dementia in later life.

- *Are better prepared to cope with loss.* Studies suggest that volunteering can help with stress and depression from the death of a spouse or other loved one. Among people who experienced a loss, those who took part in volunteer activities felt more positive about their own abilities (reported greater self-efficacy).
- *May be able to improve their thinking abilities.* Another line of research is exploring how participating in creative arts might help people age well. For example, studies have shown that older adults' memory, comprehension, creativity, and problem-solving abilities improved after an intensive, 4-week (8-session) acting course. Other studies are providing new information about ways that creative activities like music or dance can help older adults.

Melvin has not quite felt like himself since his retirement. He misses his customers and teaching new employees the trade. Linn used to care for her grand-children while her daughter was at work. Now that her grandchildren are in school, she has a lot of extra time on her hands. Melvin and Linn miss waking up with a feeling of purpose. They think joining a volunteer group might help. Research shows that people who are sociable, generous, and goal-oriented may feel happier and less depressed than other people.

## Activities to Consider

Would you like to get more involved in your community or be more socially active? There are plenty of places to look for opportunities, depending on your interests. Here are some ideas:

### Get out and about

- Visit a senior center and take part in its events and activities
- Play cards or other games with friends
- Go to the theater, a movie, or a sporting event
- Travel with a group of older adults, such as a retiree group
- Visit friends and family
- Try different restaurants
- Join a group interested in a hobby like knitting, hiking, birdwatching, painting, or wood carving
- Reconnect with old friends through your high school or college alumni association
- Visit local museums. Many offer free group tours.

### Learn something new

- Take a cooking, art, dance, language, or computer class. Get in touch with your local community college. Many offer free or discounted courses for older adults.
- Form or join a book or film club
- Try yoga, tai chi, or another new physical activity
- Learn (or relearn) how to play a musical instrument

When Maria was younger, she took part in rallies for local issues and even went to Washington, D.C., to hear Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. Recently, she has been learning about problems with the environment and wants to get involved in finding a solution. She thinks it will be a good way to volunteer her time.

### Become more active in your community

- Serve meals or organize clothing donations for people in need
- Help an organization send care packages to soldiers stationed overseas
- Care for dogs and cats at an animal shelter
- Volunteer to run errands for people with disabilities
- Join a committee or volunteer for an activity at your place of worship
- Volunteer at a school, library, museum, or hospital
- Help with gardening at a community garden or park
- Organize a park clean-up through your local recreation center or community association
- Sing in a community choral group, or play in a local band or orchestra
- Take part in a local theater troupe
- Get a part-time job
- Rediscover a favorite childhood pastime or teach it to a new generation—embroidery, photography, building models, chess, baking, woodworking, calligraphy, or quilting

### Be physically active

- Garden or do yard work
- Take an exercise class or do exercises at home
- Go dancing
- Join a sports group for older adults, like a bowling club or bocce league
- Walk or bicycle with a friend or neighbor
- Take a swimming class
- Join a local hiking or mountain biking group. Try rowing, canoeing, or kayaking at a nearby lake or river.
- Start a weekly basketball or tennis game with friends
- Join a mall-walking group
- Play with your grandchildren. Teach them a game or dance you remember from childhood.

For more information about physical activity, check out **Go4Life**<sup>®</sup>. This exercise and physical activity campaign from the National Institute on Aging has exercises and free videos and print materials at [www.nia.nih.gov/Go4Life](http://www.nia.nih.gov/Go4Life).

Two years ago, Ted began volunteering at his senior center, then he started some clubs at the center. Now he volunteers 3 days a week, leads the center's theater group, and plays in a weekly dominoes game. He also recently joined a committee for his apartment building that meets twice a month. Ted is rushing all the time and thinks he might need to cut back.

## Find the Right Balance

Everyone has different limits to the amount of time they can spend on social or other activities. What is perfect for one person might be too much for another. Be careful not to take on too much at once.

You might start by adding one or two activities to your routine and see how you feel. You can always add more.

Remember—participating in activities you enjoy should be fun, not stressful.

## For More Information About Participating in Activities

America's Natural and Cultural Resources  
Volunteer Portal  
[www.volunteer.gov](http://www.volunteer.gov)

## Corporation for National and Community Service

1-800-942-2677 (toll-free)  
1-800-833-3722 (TTY/toll-free)  
[info@cns.gov](mailto:info@cns.gov)  
[www.nationalservice.gov](http://www.nationalservice.gov)  
[www.serve.gov](http://www.serve.gov)

## Experience Corps AARP Foundation

1-202-434-6400  
[experiencecorps@aarp.org](mailto:experiencecorps@aarp.org)  
[www.experiencecorps.org](http://www.experiencecorps.org)

## VolunteerMatch

1-415-241-6868  
[www.volunteermatch.org](http://www.volunteermatch.org)

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### For more information about health and aging, contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center  
1-800-222-2225 (toll-free) • 1-800-222-4225 (TTY/toll-free)  
[niaic@nia.nih.gov](mailto:niaic@nia.nih.gov)  
[www.nia.nih.gov](http://www.nia.nih.gov)

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