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Trusted advice for a healthier life

Harvard Men's Health Watch

Retired men at work

Retirement is your reward for a long work life, but research suggests that continuing to work in some way may offer a big payday for your health.



Image: Thinkstock

Published: March, 2016

If you are retired, or counting the days, you may want to rethink leaving the workforce behind forever. Recent research has found that seniors who continue to work after age 65 are healthier than retirees.

"For many men, work defines who they are, and they still need to benefit from something meaningful and productive as they age, whether it's in their current job or field or something new," says Dr. William S. Pollack, assistant clinical professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. "Work can boost confidence, self-esteem, and happiness, all of which can help men stay active and live longer."

Working on your health

The study, published in the September 2015 issue of the CDC journal *Preventing Chronic Disease*, examined more than 83,000 adults ages 65 or older over a 15-year period. The researchers analyzed their work background and overall health.

They found that those who were still working past age 65 were approximately three times more likely to report being in good health compared with those who had retired. They were also about half as likely to be diagnosed with serious conditions like cancer, diabetes, and heart disease.

The type of work also appears to dictate your health, suggests the study. It found that the older adults with traditional blue-collar jobs, most of which involved some level of physical labor or regular movement, had the lowest risk of poor health. In comparison, those with sedentary white-collar jobs had a higher risk.

Of course, there may be an indirect link between working past retirement age and health. Many people may no longer work because of health reasons. Plus, those who continue to hold a job may be more active and healthy in general.

Invest in your brain

Other research has shown that work also improves your brain health. One study published in the Apr. 29, 2015, issue of *Neurology* involved 1,054 people ages 75 and older. It looked at their cognitive function across three areas: executive skills, such as developing strategies; verbal tasks, such as presenting information; and fluid tasks, such as solving problems.

The researchers found that those who had the highest level of exposure to all three areas during their careers had half the rate of decline in cognitive function compared with those who had less exposure. "Challenges at work may help build up a person's mental reserve for the long term," the researchers wrote.

Look at volunteering

Still, many men may want to complete their careers, or can no longer physically do a traditional job. In those cases, they can still tap into the health benefits of work without making a full job commitment.

"Since they do not have to worry any more about climbing the corporate ladder or getting the next pay raise, they could opt for part-time work and in a less-demanding field that still offers job satisfaction," says Dr. Pollack.

If money is not an issue, another way to do this is by volunteering. It can replicate the positive advantages of paid work and fulfills a social need.

"Volunteering increases your sense of purpose and positive mental outlook. You feel good by doing good," says Dr. Pollack.

In fact, people who volunteer on a regular basis tend to have less depression, fewer physical limitations, and greater longevity, according to a review published in the Aug. 25, 2014, issue of *Psychological Bulletin*.

Finding the proper volunteering fit depends on many factors, such as time commitment, personal interests, and comfort levels. For instance, do you enjoy working with people, like the homeless, or for a cause, like a food drive? Do you like to lead a team to accomplish a goal? Or do you like to be part of a team project?


After you decide, make sure to begin small—one to two shifts per week, for example—and build from there as your comfort level grows.

"You don't have to approach volunteering, or any other kind of new work, with the pressure of having to give the same sense-of-duty vigor as before," says Dr. Pollack. "The focus is to stay active and motivated and fulfilled."

Questions to consider for your post-retirement job

- **Do you want a lot of public interactions?** Or stay behind the scenes?
- **Do you want to be physically active?** Or only do computer or administrative work?
- **Are you open to trying different tasks?** Or do you want to stick to a single responsibility?

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