

Essential Evidence on a page: No. 37 Impact of retirement on physical activity

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Top line: Public health and other sector initiatives (eg transport) that encourage people to become more physically active should be targeted at those who are about to retire.

Most adults do not achieve the levels of physical activity recommended for a healthy lifestyle. There is a linear decline of activity levels with age, yet physical activity has many health benefits for older adults. If these are to be more widely adopted among older people, health and other public policy areas require an understanding of the factors that influence decreasing activity with age. One study examined the patterns of physical activity of 699 participants in the West of Scotland Twenty-07 Study who were aged 60 years when interviewed in 1991 and followed up four to five years later.¹ It examined the factors that influenced whether or not the subjects achieved currently recommended levels of activity.

A study strength is that analysis capitalised upon the longitudinal attributes of the data. The outcome 'physical activity' and its predictors were both measured on two occasions and the analysis used information on changes over time. The models were seasonally adjusted, allowing for higher levels of activity during the summer months. The age of the cohort and interview timings enabled effects of the transition to retirement to be assessed.

Since a lack of time is the most frequently cited barrier to taking part in physical activity, retirement might be expected to provide more time for leisure pursuits and therefore for increased physical activity. This cohort of older adults showed, however, very little increase in non-work activity after retirement, and not nearly enough to compensate for the lost physical activity through work. It was also found that being employed reduced the likelihood of being active outside work and that the more physically demanding the work, the less activity was achieved outside work. When the workers in the more physically-active occupations retired, they were less likely to have had the experience of active leisure from which to build: this group may need more support to find appropriate opportunities for substitute physical activity. These findings support the notion that people compensate for high levels of activity at work with lower levels of activity outside work.

The study found that higher levels of physical activity associated with a healthier lifestyle, and that socio-economic factors played a minor role in determining the level of physical activity. A substantial amount of physical activity occurred at work but was lost by those who had retired, for while those who were not working were more physically active at home or at leisure than those in work, the majority of the sample did too little physical activity outside work to compensate for the loss of work-based activity.

Another reason for declining physical activity with age may be cultural expectations and norms (e.g. take life more easily on retirement) and a lack of awareness of the benefits of increasing activity levels among older people. Such cultural and ageist expectations must be challenged if the health benefits of regular activity in later life are to be realised.

¹ Berger, U, Dur, G., Mutrie, N., Hannah, M. 2005 The impact of retirement on physical activity, *Ageing and Society*, 25: 181-195