NATIONAL INSTITUTE ON AGING

NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

# Participating in Activities You Enjoy—More Than Just Fun and Games

## *Tips from the National Institute on Aging*

***June feels great. She enjoys gardening, playing cards with friends on Tuesdays and Fridays at the senior center, and taking a water aerobics class at the county indoor pool. She turns 78 this year, but she feels like she's still in her thirties.***

Does June's active lifestyle have anything to do with her good health and good function? Researchers would likely say "yes." There are many things you can do to help yourself age well. Physical activity, exercise, and making healthy food choices are the cornerstones for most suggestions about healthy aging. But emerging research also indicates the possibility that engaging in social and productive activities you enjoy, like taking an art class or volunteering in your community or with your place of worship, may also help maintain your wellbeing. A number of early studies found that people who are involved in hobbies and other social and leisure pursuits may be at lower risk for (and less likely to develop) some health problems, including dementia. They might even live longer. In one study, older adults who reported participating in social activities (e.g., played games, belonged to social groups, traveled) or meaningful, productive activities (e.g., had paid or unpaid jobs, gardened) lived longer than people who did not. Researchers are exploring if participation in these kinds of activities can be the direct cause of positive health outcomes.

***Melvin has not quite felt like himself since he retired. He worked at the same job for over 50 years and enjoyed his daily routine. Now, Melvin misses catching up with his customers and hearing about their families. He misses teaching new employees the ins and outs of the trade. He misses waking up feeling like he has a purpose. Melvin heard about a program at a library where retired people volunteer to help children with homework. He thinks that might be a good idea for him.***

Research shows that people who are sociable, generous, and goal-oriented may be happier and less depressed than other people. Sitting at home alone could help explain why Melvin is not feeling like himself. Volunteering might help Melvin feel better. According to researchers, older adults who participate in what they believe are meaningful

activities, like volunteering in their communities, say they feel healthier and happier. For example, older adult volunteers from an urban community worked approximately 15 hours a week in their neighborhood public elementary schools, in a special program designed to improve children's school success. Researchers learned that the older volunteers increased their cognitive, social, and physical activity levels. Participants also reported feeling personal satisfaction from the experience. Although more research is needed, researchers think that over the long term the participants may have decreased their risk for disability, dependency, and dementia in later life.

***When Maria was younger, she took part in rallies for local issues and even went to Washington, DC, to hear Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech. Maria is proud she participated in these events. She currently serves lunch at a homeless shelter twice a week but is looking for a second activity. Maria has been learning about the problems with the environment and wants to get involved in finding a solution. She thinks it would be a good way to volunteer her time and give back.***

Many causes need help from volunteers. For example, groups that help homeless people need volunteers to serve meals or organize clothing donations. The USO needs people to send care packages to soldiers stationed overseas. Animal shelters need help caring for dogs and cats. Senior groups need aides to help people with disabilities run their errands. The list goes on. Researchers have found that older adults, like Maria, who take part in these types of activities often do so to make a difference in their communities and feel good about what they are doing.

***Linn was used to helping care for her grandchildren while her daughter was at work. But now the younger grandchildren are in high school. They just don't need as much help. As a result, Linn finds that she has a lot of extra time on her hands. She is thinking about joining her church's young-at-heart social group. She hears that they do many different volunteer activities, play bingo Sunday evenings, go to the movies together, have a knitting club, and even organize a power walk in the mall two mornings a week.***

Linn's church has an active program. But, there are plenty of other options for places to volunteer or be socially active. Where you look to find these opportunities might depend on what you are interested in doing. The following are some examples of social and productive activities you might like:

- Volunteering at a library, hospital, or other community health facility
- Joining a senior center
- Playing cards and other games with your friends
- Going to the theater, a movie, or a sporting event
- Traveling with a group of older adults, perhaps a retiree group
- Visiting friends and family

- Trying different restaurants
- Gardening in your backyard or at a community park
- Organizing a park clean-up through your local recreation center
- Taking a cooking class
- Singing in a choral group
- Joining a local theater troupe
- Forming or joining a book club
- Going dancing
- Taking a group exercise class
- Playing a musical instrument, learning a new instrument
- Joining a group interested in a hobby like knitting or wood carving
- Getting a part-time job
- Taking an art class

***Two years ago, Ted started doing volunteer work at his senior center. Later he started some clubs at the center. Now he volunteers 3 days a week, is part of the center's theater group, and plays in a weekly poker game. He recently joined the planning committee for his apartment building. It meets twice a month. Ted is rushing all the time and starting to feel that he is doing too much.***

Everyone has different limits to the amount of time he or she can spend on social or other activities. What is perfect for one person might be too much for another. Ted may cut back his volunteer hours and find that doing a little less is just right for him. His friend Rasheed may feel that doing two activities—a monthly book club and tutoring once a week in the high school—is enough. Remember: participating in activities you enjoy should be fun, not stressful.

***June, Melvin, Maria, Linn, and Ted are examples of people who are staying socially engaged in their communities. You may want to try too!***

Here are some resources that can help you find activities you might enjoy:

### America's Natural and Cultural Resources Volunteer Portal

*www.volunteer.gov*

A Federal Government website to help people find volunteer opportunities in State parks and other areas with natural and cultural resources. You can search by location and type of activity such as "tour guide" or "botany."

### Corporation for National and Community Service

*www.nationalservice.gov*
1-202-606-5000
1-800-833-3722 (TTY/toll-free)

A Federal Government resource aimed at improving lives, strengthening communities, and fostering civic engagement through service and volunteering. Learn about research on volunteering in America and find out about special volunteering initiatives.

### Experience Corps

*www.experiencecorps.org*
1-202-434-6400

Members tutor and mentor children in cities across the country and provide literacy coaching, homework help, and consistent role models, as well as committed, caring attention. Find a program near you and read about how the program has made a difference in the lives of the volunteers and the children's families.

### Senior Corps

*www.getinvolved.gov*
1-800-942-2677 (toll-free)
1-800-833-3722 (TTY/toll-free)

A Federal group that works with thousands of nonprofit organizations and local agencies—both secular and faith-based—to promote service opportunities for older Americans. Learn how to get involved in a variety of volunteer activities near you.

### United We Serve

*www.serve.gov*
1-202-606-5000
1-800-833-3722 (TTY/toll-free)

Part of the Federal Government's nationwide service initiative, this online resource helps you find volunteer opportunities in your community. You can also find out how to create your own volunteer opportunity and register it on the website.

### VolunteerMatch

*www.volunteermatch.org*
1-415-241-6868

A nonprofit organization that helps people find volunteer opportunities that fit their interests and needs. You can learn how to get started and register on their website for email alerts.

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*Visit* ***www.nihseniorhealth.gov****, a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This website has health and wellness information for older adults. Special features make it simple to use. For example, you can click on a button to make the type larger.*

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