**Pensioners in book clubs 'live longer': Maintaining social links in old age may be more important than keeping fit**

* **Maintaining social links in old age may be more important than keeping fit**
* **Experts tracked a group of English men and women after they retired**
* **More social groups pensioners part of, lower their risk of an early death**

By [BEN SPENCER MEDICAL CORRESPONDENT FOR THE DAILY MAIL](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/search.html?s=&authornamef=Ben+Spencer+Medical+Correspondent+For+The+Daily+Mail)

**PUBLISHED:** 00:53, 16 February 2016 | **UPDATED:** 01:06, 16 February 2016

Being a member of a book club or a church group may extend your life in retirement, research suggests.

Scientists found that maintaining social links in old age might even be more important for health than keeping fit.

Experts tracked a group of English men and women as they went through their first six years of retirement.

They found that the more social groups the pensioners belonged to after they stop working, the lower their risk of an early death.

The scientists found a six-fold different in mortality rates between those who stayed a member of at least two social groups they had belonged to before retirement, and those who stopped attending the clubs.

And people who joined new clubs were even less likely to die early, according to the results published last night in BMJ Open, a UK medical journal.

The researchers, from the University of Queensland in Australia, wrote: ‘Retiring from work constitutes a major life transition that most people experience at some point in the course of their life, posing significant challenges to health and wellbeing.’

Previous studies have found that up to 25 per of the newly-retired experience a significant drop in health soon after giving up work.

This is thought to be because social isolation has a profound effect on health - particularly increasing the risk of dementia, depression and cognitive decline.

The authors wrote that the number of strong social relationships people maintain during retirement has more of a bearing on life expectancy than physical exercise, smoking or drinking.

The researchers looked at data from 424 English adults, who were tracked for six years after retirement.

They were compared with a second group of people still working, matched for age, sex, and health.

Each participant was asked how many different organisations they belonged to - including leisure groups such as book clubs, community associations such as church or women’s societies, sporting clubs, or professional organisations such as trade unions.

The authors found that 6.6 per cent of the retirees died in the first six years after they finished work.

Those who had maintained two group memberships had a 2 per cent risk of death in the first six years of retirement, those who gave up one group had a 5 per cent risk of death, and those who stopped both groups had a 12 per cent risk.

Those who kept on with two groups but joined one new club saw their risk of death drop to 0.95 per cent, and those who joined two new groups were only 0.41 per cent likely to die.

Group membership made no difference to mortality rates for those still in formal employment.

The researchers also assessed whether changes in physical activity levels affected risk of death.

They found that if a person exercised once a week before retiring and maintained this frequency post-retirement, they had a 3 per cent chance of dying in the next six years, a 6 per cent chance if they reduced frequency to less than weekly and an 11 per cent chance if they stopped exercising altogether.

The researchers wrote: ‘Accordingly, we can see that the effects of physical activity on health were comparable to those associated with maintaining old group memberships and developing new ones.

‘Practical interventions should focus on helping retirees to maintain their sense of purpose and belonging by assisting them to connect to groups and communities that are meaningful to them.’

Anna Dixon, chief executive of the Centre for Ageing Better, said last night: ‘Social connections are just as important as money and health to a good later life.

‘We believe that everyone should have the opportunity to establish and maintain social connections – whether that is through living in an age friendly community, engaging in fulfilling work or volunteering, or participating in other activities.’

Janet Morrison, chief executive of charity Independent Age, added: ‘This research underlines the importance of making sure older people stay connected to their communities.

‘It’s yet more evidence that having a sense of purpose and taking part in meaningful activity can make a really positive difference to health and wellbeing in later life.

‘As the population ages and family structures change, combating loneliness is increasingly going to become a pressing public policy issue, and it’s important that much more is done to tackle this issue.’