**Social activities such as book clubs just as important as fitness to help you live longer, says study**

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Study finds a retired person’s risk of death is dramatically lowered if they take part in such groups

Taking part in social activities such as book clubs or church groups after retirement makes people live longer and appears to be as important to health as exercise, according to new research.

A retired person’s risk of death is dramatically lowered if they take part in such groups in the first few years after stopping working, the study found – suggesting that future retirees should pay as much attention to keeping active socially as they do to planning their finances and maintaining their physical health.

Researchers at the University of Queensland in Australia tracked the health of more than 400 over-50s living in England for six years after they retired, comparing their results with people of a similar age who were still working. They found that every social group membership people lost after retirement resulted in a 10 per cent drop in their quality of life rating six years later.

If a person belonged to two social groups before retirement and kept this up over the following six years, their risk of death was just 2 per cent, the study found. However, the risk rose to 5 per cent if they gave up one membership and 12 per cent if they gave up membership of both. The researchers said social groups could be defined as anything which a person sees as “an important part of their identity”, from book clubs to church groups through to tennis club memberships or involvement in trade unions. “Retirement has an important bearing on health and quality of life because it typically involves relinquishing social group memberships that have been a key focus for people’s self-definition for years or decades,” they wrote.

The study also examined how changes in exercise levels after retirement affected a person’s risk of death – and found that the impact was the same as giving up membership of social groups. Those who exercised vigorously once a week before retirement and continued to do so afterwards had a 3 per cent risk of death, rising to 6 per cent if they exercised less than once a week and 11 per cent if they stopped altogether.

Responding to the findings, Anna Dixon, the chief executive of the Centre for Ageing Better, said social connections were “just as important as money and health” when it came to having 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,” she added.

“Social connections are essential to everyone, but especially to people as they experience the major changes that are associated with later life.”

The research, which is the first time that the impact of social groups on health after retirement has been examined in detail, is published in the online journal BMJ Open.

“Practical interventions should focus on helping retirees connect to groups and communities that are meaningful to them,” the researchers wrote.