# Sign up before it’s too late: clubs are the key to a happy old age

**Scientists found that if a person exercised vigorously once a week before retirement and kept it up afterwards, their chance of dying over the next six years was 3 per cent**

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If you’ve recently retired and your family keep handing you brochures for book clubs or volunteering schemes, take heart. Their efforts could mean you have longer to spend with them.

Being a regular member of a social group such as a bridge club or tennis club after retirement can help you to live longer and feel better, research indicates. The more groups someone joins after retirement, the lower the risk of death.

Researchers from the University of Queensland found that the more groups a pensioner joined, the greater their wellbeing.

Scientists tracked the health of 410 people older than 50 after they retired and compared them with 424 people of similar age in England who had not retired. They found that if a person belonged to two groups before retirement and kept these up over the following six years, their risk of death was 2 per cent. This rose to 5 per cent if they left one group, and to 12 per cent if they left both.

Joining an extra group or two societies reduced the risk markedly, to just below 1 per cent, and the rate fell to 0.4 per cent if they joined two. No such patterns were seen for those still in formal employment. The scientists said that the results observed the effects of physical activity on health.

They found that if a person exercised vigorously once a week before retirement and kept it up afterwards, their chance of dying over the next six years was 3 per cent, rising to 6 per cent if they reduced the frequency to less than once a week and to 11 per cent if they stopped altogether. The researchers said that retirement could be stressful because it involved leaving social groups that might have been a key focus for a person’s identity for years or decades.

Previous studies have demonstrated links between health and group membership, including belonging to a profession or a trade union.

Participants in the study, published in the online journal BMJ Open, were asked how many organisations they belonged to and to complete a questionnaire to assess their quality of life and physical health.

Those whose quality of life was good before they retired were more likely to score highly when quality of life was assessed after retirement.

Membership of social groups played a part. Compared with those still working, every group membership lost after retirement was linked to about a 10 per cent drop in quality of life six years later.

The researchers said their findings suggested that people given financial planning after retirement should also receive social planning.

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

“Interestingly, the BMJ study points to the particular importance of strong social connections and how they help some people to overcome disadvantages such as poor health or a lack of financial security. By understanding more about what influences a good later life, we can ensure fewer people miss out.”