

Retirement boosts men's health (but women may as well keep working)

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A study found that men's health improved after they had retired
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Retirement is a boon for men's health but not necessarily for women's, according to a study of 50,000 people nearing the end of their working lives.

Economists found that while men tended to think that stopping work would precipitate a decline into frailty and hypertension, the opposite was usually the case. Their health not only turned out to be better than they expected, but actually improved overall. When they looked at the same statistics for women, however, they found no evidence that those who retired were

any better off. This may be because women are generally more health-conscious anyway, or possibly because their careers have often been more disrupted by motherhood.

“I really expected that people’s health would deteriorate after they retired,” Claudia Senik, professor of economics at Paris-Sorbonne University, said. “My reasoning would be that many people feel disaffiliated, especially if they had invested a lot of interest in their work and they lose their social integration. But the data tell another story.”

The findings, published in a working paper released by the IZA Institute of Labour Economics in Berlin, are the latest salvo in a decades-long dispute about whether hanging up your work shoes is good for you or not. Several analyses have shown that giving up work is followed by accelerated cognitive decline, poorer mobility and an increased risk of chronic conditions compared with those who carry on working after statutory retirement age. Other studies, sometimes using the same data, find that retirement leads people to become more active and to sleep better.

All of these efforts have been plagued by the difficulty of sorting out what is cause and what is effect. For example, do people retire because they feel their health is starting to ebb? To get around this, Professor Senik and her colleagues, Bénédicte Apouey, of the Paris School of Economics, and Cahit Guven, of Deakin University in Australia, looked not only at people’s health but at what they expected from their health.

The researchers studied 14 years' worth of surveys involving Australian men and women between the ages of 50 and 75. The participants had filled out a form each year detailing eight aspects of their health. After adjustments for age, occupation and income, men who retired were 20 per cent more likely to find their health to be better than expected than those who did not. There was no such link for women.

Professor Senik said this did not automatically mean that retirement was not good for women. "One possibility is that women are more able than men to make correct judgments about their health," she said.