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## The influence of being occupied on the perceived health of elderly individuals

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### Abstract

**Introduction.** The 21st century has seen an ever-growing ageing population. Therefore, strategies are necessary in order to improve their quality of life. Health is one of the most important variables in determining quality of life in the elderly. Currently, there are numerous theories attempting to improve the health of the elderly through the use of activity as healthy habits. **Aims.** The objective of this research study is to determine whether or not the degree of activity in individuals over the age of 60 influences their perceived health. **Methodology.** A descriptive correlational study was conducted. The sample consisted of 500 elderly individuals in Almeria (and its province) over the age of 60, having a mean age of 70.80 years. The Questionnaire on Occupational Behavior in the Elderly (C-COM) and the SF-36 on Quality of life, related to health were used. **Result.** A moderate correlation was found between being active, be it with daily tasks or leisure-related activities, and a higher degree of perceived health. **Conclusions and recommendations.** Further study is necessary in this area in order to help guide future occupational programs and policies for the elderly. If activity helps to improve the level of health in the elderly, then surely healthcare costs will be reduced, and further investments may be made in these activities.

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## 1. Introduction

Ageing populations are on the rise worldwide. The 21st century is destined to have an increasingly ageing population and an abundance of elderly individuals. Therefore, strategies are needed in order to improve their quality of life. Health is one of the most determinant elements in quality of life in the elderly.

This study considers the importance of activity as a tool to improve health in the elderly and to slow down the effects of ageing. The UN (1948), in its Universal Declaration of Human Rights, declares that everyone should have the possibility and the capability of being active. However, these rights do not exist in many parts of the world, as Wilcock (2008) stated, since many individuals lack either the health or the time for them, resulting in physical or mental illness and long term disability, particularly in the elderly.

This study examines the term “occupied” from a therapeutic and preventive perspective, focusing on the individuals’ health and quality of life. Correa, Goldils, López & Pérez (2010) stated that from a therapeutic perspective, the absence or interruption of activity threatens one’s health; on the other hand, when illness, trauma or social conditions have affected the biological or psychological health of an individual, this is an effective means of reorganizing their behavior. The preventive perspective refers to the maintenance of health and quality of life by carrying out activities that favor a high functional level and physical and mental well-being.

Retired elderly individuals have more time for leisure activities and may devote themselves to their preferred hobbies and activities. According to Butrica, Johnson & Zedlewski (2007, cited in Cole & McDonald, 2011) as the population ages, elderly individuals may look forward to some 25-30 healthy years of life after their retirement. Being occupied may prevent the elderly from falling into a sedentary lifestyle after retirement, due to the decrease in activity and business. Furthermore, the majority of these individuals need to have a sense of usefulness and participation, of belonging to something, of having an emotional and sentimental life that exists within and for the community. They also have a need to be needed, something that can only be achieved through performance and diligence. As some psychologists such as Piaget suggested, the psychic life, its balance and functioning, are maintained through “activity” (Fernández-López, 1996).

Adams, Restorick & Cole (2011) assessed the importance of activity on the health of the individual, based on the activity theory of ageing, which emphasizes the benefits of maintaining an active lifestyle after retirement, replacing past social roles and developing new occupations that are appropriate for the age of the individual.

Using this approach, Moruno & Romero (2004) suggested that activity promotes health and prevents illness and disabilities. Likewise, Sáez-Narro, Aleixandre & Meléndez (1994) stated that leisure and activity in the elderly are a necessary part of productive and healthy ageing.

Along these lines, Hakansson, Lissner, Björkelund & Sonn (2009) examined the level of daily activity (paid work, domestic work and leisure activities) in active women in relation to their level of perceived health. Similarly, activity in daily tasks is clearly fundamental in maintaining capacities as Fernández-López (1996) found, with many elderly individuals planning the course of their day. This planning implies certain fundamental psychological functions, contributes to the creation of habits and ensures certain mental, cognitive, social and physical capacities, exercising and exploiting them.

Morales & Bravo (2006) also suggested that leisure activities are beneficial, given their intrinsic nature. Therapeutic leisure is considered to be a process that promotes desired changes in the physical, emotional or social aspect of an individual’s behavior, favoring their personal development.

It has been found that certain types of activity, such as physical activity are beneficial to health. Researchers such as DiPietro (2001) have described changes in the pattern of physical activity during old age and its relationship with the individual’s functional autonomy. Moderate levels of physical activity help to protect from certain chronic illnesses and their negative effects. That is, activities such as walking, climbing stairs, riding a bike or caring for a garden have very positive effects on increasing vital energy and maintaining muscle tone.

Demonstrating the importance of being occupied, Adams et al. (2011) suggested that a reduction in social participation may lead to depression and a worsening of the state of health. Along these same lines, MacDonald, Nielson, & Cameron (1987) revealed that individuals with depression reduced their activity level and their levels of autonomy and health directly decreased. Various authors have demonstrated the effectiveness of activity in reducing the mortality rate in the elderly population (Manini et al., 2006).

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