

Destination Healthy Aging: The Physical, Cognitive and Social Benefits of Travel



Global population aging is the seminal theme of our era – influencing individual lives, families and communities and all aspects of public policy. While our understanding of the profound changes in our lives that will affect us as we age is still limited, it is clear that successfully navigating this demographic transformation requires a focus on the healthy aging process.

It is well appreciated that those who stay healthy as they age are able to sustain active lifestyles, including traveling into our 70s, 80s and beyond. It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that the reverse is also true – as one travels, one will be healthier, which is good for the individual as well as for society.

A meta-analysis, Destination: Healthy Aging: The Physical, Cognitive and Social Benefits of Travel, undertaken by the Global Coalition on Aging shows the existing data connecting travel and healthy aging is powerful. Our key findings give us direction for further inquiry, research and analysis and provide a strong foundation upon which to build future studies.

The unprecedented rate at which the global population is aging brings about health and societal consequences

- Between 1950 and 2050, 30 years will have been added to life expectancy. In the United States, there are already more people over the age of 60 than under 15, and globally, there will be one billion people over 60 by 2020.
- Physical inactivity accounts for more than three million deaths per year, largely from non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as coronary heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, and cancer – diseases that increase in prevalence with age. Healthcare costs for NCDs are estimated to skyrocket to \$30 trillion over the next 20 years.
- According to World Health Organization Director General Margaret Chan, “If older people can remain active participants in society, they can continue to contribute to our socioeconomic development.”
- One survey shows that after being on vacation for only a day or two, 89 percent of people are able to leave the stressors of work behind and relax. This has long-term effects, as stress has been shown to play a damaging role in health and can actually speed up the aging process.
- According to Dr. Paul Nussbaum, Ph.D., ABPP, president and founder of the Brain Health Center, Inc., “Because it challenges the brain with new and different experiences and environments, travel is an important behavior that promotes brain health and builds brain resilience across the lifespan.”

The physical and mental activities commonly associated with travel have important health and social benefits

The unprecedented rate at which the global population is aging brings about health and societal consequences

- One study found that women who vacationed every six years or less had a significantly higher risk of developing a heart attack or coronary death compared to women who vacationed at least twice a year.
- Similarly, another study showed that men who did not take an annual vacation had a 20 percent higher risk of death and 30 percent greater risk of death from heart disease.
- Older adults who are physically active have lower rates of heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes, cancers, lower risk of falling, and better cognitive function.
- Ordinary activities, such as listening to the radio, reading newspapers, playing puzzle games and visiting museums, have been shown to reduce the risk of Alzheimer’s by as much as 47 percent.
- Maintaining or initiating social participation in later life has been shown to have positive benefits on the mental health of older adults.

Destination Healthy Aging: The Physical, Cognitive and Social Benefits of Travel (CONTINUED)

Adults who traveled as students earn more and say that educational travel influenced their career plans

- Adults who went on a domestic educational trip between the ages of 12-18 earn 12 percent greater personal income annually than non-travelers.
- Of the adults surveyed who traveled in their youth, 89 percent felt that educational trips had a positive impact on their education and/or career.
- Educational travel influenced the career choices of more than half (52%) of those surveyed.

“We took a trip to Lake Mead. We went swimming and when we got out of the water, because of the humidity, our bathing suits were dry...my teacher explained the scientific reason for the dry bathing suits. I was fascinated by the explanation and this started my career goal to become a high school science teacher.”

“Education that happens within the classroom is very limited. It helps to see, smell, hear and touch different places. It opens your mind to many different cultures. [Educational trips] increased my understanding of different ways of living and being. It also expanded my knowledge of job options for my future. I became a bilingual teacher partly because of the different places and cultures I got to see on these trips.”

Travel had a lasting impact on students, expanding their perspectives, increasing their cultural knowledge and making them better citizens—regardless of gender, ethnicity or other demographic factors

In addition to an effect on grades, participants believe:

- Educational travel encouraged a connection to American heritage and history (85%);
- Experiencing local culture and history on their trips had a lasting impact (77%);
- Travel made them a better person (34%).

“When you experience another culture, it's something you never forget! Experiencing economic diversity, seeing where we came from, how we evolved as a people - it certainly influenced my thinking. Especially when I started working and meeting other people from different backgrounds.”