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Enjoying a stress-free journey to good health

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Sometimes ageing well can feel like a lot of hard work – eat right, exercise, keep the mind active, stay connected. Travel is something we tend to treat as an indulgence, when we can take time off from 'looking after ourselves'. But research is increasingly suggesting that regular travel can actually be a key component of healthy ageing.



Our research at Bond University exploring the concept of 'prescribing tourism' highlighted the long-term health value of regular travel.

The meta-analysis was done in collaboration with Prof Jun Wen at the Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Macau University of Science and Technology and led by Fangli Hu from the School of Medical and Health Sciences, Edith Cowan University.

In one of the earliest studies we looked at, researchers tracked more than 12,000 people for nine years and found regular holidaying was linked to better long-term health outcomes.

It turns out that travelling is one of the best ways to hit many 'healthy ageing' targets in one go.

Time in nature lowers stress and steadies mood and walking a new city or coastline is physical activity you barely notice you're doing.

Sharing a meal with old friends or striking up conversation with strangers feeds the social connection we know protects against loneliness and cognitive decline in later life.

Even the mental stimulation of navigating somewhere unfamiliar has been linked to a reduced risk of cognitive impairment in older adults.

A holiday, done well, is exercise, socialising and stress relief rolled into one – which is exactly the combination doctors usually recommend for healthy ageing.

The key is maximising those benefits by making smart choices about the how of travel, along with the where.

The most exciting destination is not necessarily the best destination for your wellbeing.

Somewhere quieter, less crowded and taken at a slower pace could bring the biggest benefits.

A sense of familiarity can be helpful to reduce disorientation, travel stress and overstimulation from more chaotic environments.

Those seeking a city break might look for places they can walk easily, or booking accommodation in less crowded areas over the tourist hotspots or stay in one place for longer rather than frequently changing destinations.

The point of a holiday is not to prove that we can still do everything we did at 30 – it's to have an experience that makes us feel good.

Gentle physical activities, cultural experiences, music, art, food, time with family and friends and experiences that bring back positive memories can all contribute.

Match activities to your abilities and avoid unnecessary physical or cognitive strain. This also might mean minimising exhausting itineraries and building more rest periods into the day.

It might mean travelling with someone you trust, choosing accommodation that makes life easier or leaving enough flexibility in the schedule to change plans if needed.

Long journeys, crowded airports and unfamiliar environments can create stress and anxiety, particularly for people with existing health conditions. For some travellers, a direct flight may be preferable to saving money with multiple connections. For others, a train or car journey may offer greater flexibility and the ability to stop and rest.

For people with mild dementia, for example, the research highlights the potential benefits of quieter transport, easily accessible seating and avoiding unnecessarily complicated journeys.

Selecting transport options with as much care as the destination itself can make an important difference.

We often talk about healthy ageing as though it is primarily about avoiding illness.

But ageing well should also be about maintaining our ability to experience pleasure, connection, curiosity and a sense of purpose.

Researchers are still building the hard clinical evidence for exactly how much travel helps and for whom, but the early signs are positive.

This next chapter of travel is more than a reward for good health – it's part of how to look after it.

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