

Plant therapy can improve seniors' health

Local study finds such activities help prevent diseases

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Plants and gardening have more than just a relaxing effect on man, research here has found.

Participating in activities such as gardening or guided walks in parks improves the mental health and well-being of the elderly, said a local study.

This is the first study that shows that joining a guided group activity involving plants reduces a type of component in the blood associated with inflammatory diseases, such as depression, dementia and cancer.

Such activities also help maintain levels of another component that supports the brain and prevents it from degenerating.

"The main implication of this study is that the elderly can use various parks in Singapore as therapeutic venues and conduct therapeutic horticulture", which can help prevent chronic diseases, said Associate Professor Roger Ho from the National University of Singapore, the study's principal investigator.

The study, published last month in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, was jointly done by the National University Health System (Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine) and National Parks Board (NParks).

A total of 59 adults aged 61 to 77 were recruited, with about half randomly assigned to get horticultural therapy and the other half in the control group.

Those in the former group went for 15 one-hour sessions, with activities such as indoor gardening, growing, maintaining and harvesting plants and guided walks in parks.

Both the horticultural therapy and control groups had psychosocial assessments and blood samples taken at the start of the study, as well as three months and six months later.

The samples were taken to measure certain components in the blood, such as those that may have protective functions, while the psychosocial measures examined aspects like cognitive function, depression, anxiety and satisfaction with life.

The study found that therapeutic horticulture can enhance the well-being of older adults.

Horticultural therapy is well established around the world, said mental health expert Kua Ee Heok, one of the researchers.

It is also well accepted in medical care facilities as a means of providing patients with carefully designed gardening activities to improve their quality of life.

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