

# The Health Benefits of Knitting



# About Knit For Peace

**Knit for Peace is an initiative of the Charities Advisory Trust. It started as an income generation project for Hutu and Tutsi widows, victims of the Rwandan genocide and civil war. At our suggestion they knitted school jumpers for the many orphans, and we paid them by raising the funds through featuring the project in the Good Gifts Catalogue, another of the Trust's initiatives.**

Hearing of the project, colleagues in India suggested they would like to start a similar project, bringing together Hindu and Muslim women in the slums of Delhi. Through the SE Asian Women's Network the idea spread, and Knit for Peace groups were set up in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Afghanistan. These groups, as a gesture of goodwill, donated their knitting to each other's children. When people in the UK heard about this project they asked if they could knit for the children of Afghanistan. "If we can send them soldiers, we can send jumpers for their children." We undertook to deliver the knitting to the NGO organising Knit for Peace in Afghanistan. Through word of mouth the idea spread, and we were soon receiving a positive tsunami of knitted goods.

We had not planned to set up Knit for Peace in the UK, nor anticipated that there would be so many keen knitters who were seeking an outlet for their knitting, but were reluctant to thwart people's wish to help others. Knit for Peace is, and has been, a bottom up, demand-led service. We have more than 15,000 knitters in the UK. The majority are post-retirement age, and judging from their comments to us, they find knitting greatly enhances their pleasure in life, and improves their sense of well-being.

If you would like to support or volunteer for Knit for Peace, please find more information at our website, [www.knitforpeace.org.uk](http://www.knitforpeace.org.uk), or contact us on [knitforpeace@charitiesadvisorytrust.org.uk](mailto:knitforpeace@charitiesadvisorytrust.org.uk) or on **020 7794 9835**.

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Our thanks go to Professor Muki Haklay and Professor David Metz, our academic advisers, for their invaluable support and guidance. Above all, we are indebted to our community of knitters, and to all those whose evidence-based research has proved the Health Benefits of Knitting.



# Executive summary

## Background

This report is in two parts: a Literature Review of the evidence-based research on the health benefits of knitting, especially for the elderly, and the opportunities it offers for volunteering. Secondly, a Survey of over 1,000 knitters who send their knitting to Knit for Peace.

A grant from the Big Lottery Accelerating Ideas Fund enabled us to carry out an extensive Literature Review, to show the effectiveness of knitting (and crochet) in helping older people become more resilient, including improvements in mental and physical health, overcoming isolation and loneliness and increasing a sense of well-being.

In parallel a **Survey** was undertaken of those who donated their knitting to Knit for Peace, to distribute to those in need. This was a useful cross-reference to support the research findings illustrated in the Literature Review.

## The findings

Evidence based research shows knitting has positive health benefits, physical and mental.

- Lowers blood pressure
- Reduces depression and anxiety
- Slows the onset of dementia
- Is as relaxing as yoga
- Distracts from chronic pain
- Provides an opportunity for creativity (at a time of reducing capacity)
- Increases sense of wellbeing
- Reduces loneliness and isolation
- Increases sense of usefulness and inclusion in society

Knitting for those in need is a volunteering activity that can carry on into extreme old age and can be undertaken by those whose sight, hearing and mobility are severely limited.

It provides an activity that gives a sense of purpose. Knitting for charity makes people feel more useful and worthwhile. Self-worth is important post retirement, especially with physical decline.



Of those in poor or very poor health, 92% said knitting improved their health.

82% said knitting relaxed them

65% of our knitters said knitting for others made them feel useful

92% said knitting improved their mood

67% of our knitters are over 60. Some are as old as 100 and many in their 80s and 90s.



## Makes people feel better able to cope

A more resilient ageing population is happier and makes less demands on the NHS and is less dependent on care.

## Action needed

The biggest bars to knitting are:

- Having not learnt to knit when young
- Having no one to knit for.

**Teaching knitting** in schools is a skill for life, sowing the seeds of an activity that is useful in later life. It takes less than two hours to teach basic knitting – after that it is practice that improves.

Teaching knitting is a good inter-generational activity, increasing respect for older people. Although the teaching can be done by volunteers, funding would be needed for co-ordination, travel costs and promotion to schools.

## Providing an outlet for knitting is essential

The knitters in our survey knitted for an average of 13.5 hours a week (some for as much as 35 hours a week!) In that time an experienced knitter could produce 6 baby or children hats plus 2 baby jackets or 2 baby blankets and 2 scarves.

*"Knitting keeps me occupied and calms my mind"*

88% of our knitters learnt to knit as a child.

56% of our knitters said they would find it hard to find an outlet for their knitting if it weren't for Knit for Peace.

90% of our knitters said distribution of knitting to those in need was Knit for Peace's most valued service.

Dear Knit for Peace,  
Please could these items go to refugee camps  
Our combined efforts from Katherine, Margaret, Peggy, Nova + myself. The squares for the large blanket were donated by a lady called Jacqui. She won them in a competition by a crochet group she was in, where every member made her a square. She asked me to make them into a blanket so that somebody in a refugee camp could have something really bright + special.



## Part 1

# A Literature Review of the evidence-based research on the health benefits of knitting, especially for the elderly, and the opportunities it offers for volunteering



# A Literature Review of the Evidence-Based Research on the Health Benefits of Knitting

## Introduction: purpose

The purpose of this Review is to gather together the evidence on the health benefits of knitting (and other repetitive needle-work activities). There is an enormous amount of research showing that knitting<sup>1</sup> has physical and mental health benefits, that it slows the onset of dementia, combats depression and distracts from chronic pain. It is an activity that can be continued into extreme old age. It is a sociable activity that helps overcome isolation and loneliness, too often a feature of old age. It is a skill that can continue when sight and strength are diminished. Knitters need outlets for their knitting, since the needs of family and friends are soon satisfied. Being able to donate their knitting to those in need, a service provided by Knit for Peace, is highly valued by knitters, so they feel useful. Knitting can continue into extreme old age: unlike most volunteering, it can be done from your armchair!

There is a surprisingly large body of research showing the health benefits of knitting. What is more surprising is how little known this research is. Our experience suggests however, knitting is not well perceived as a potential preventative and treatment measure. This is particularly important with regards to its potential benefit to the older population. We have found people are dismissive of knitting as a 'grandmotherly' activity. One potential funder, when rejecting our application for support, said "Are we going backwards?". No doubt a shiny new IT programme would have been more to his taste. Yet its very accessibility is a benefit, needing little equipment, as are its portability and its flexibility – it can be picked up and put down, with little preparation beyond finding a chair, and can be fitted into odd moments between other activities. It involves no clearing up. It can be done whilst watching television or listening to the radio. Some brave souls knit when passengers in a train, tube, car or bus (a good way of striking up conversations!). Instead of deriding knitters, and dismissing it as old fashioned, surely done because it is a craft most practiced by women, the evidence suggests knitting should be widely promoted because of its health-giving qualities.

Knitting is both process and product-oriented (Blanche 2007<sup>2</sup>). As a process, knitting encompasses repetitive tasks that require physical and cognitive skills (Hosegood 2009<sup>3</sup>). Process means knitters are involved in the activity, with health benefits. Product-orientation means there is a specific output, visible to all, which is an aspect of knitting that creates satisfaction at completing a task, and reinforces a sense of capability.

(1) Throughout the text we refer to knitting, as it is the dominant activity, but there are the same benefits for crochet and needlepoint.

(2) Blanche, E.I. (2007). "The Expression of Creativity through Occupation." *Journal of Occupational Science* 14(1): pp. 21-29.

(3) Hosegood, B. (2009). "Whip Your Hobby into Shape: Knitting, Feminism, and Construction of Gender." *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture* 7(2): pp.148-63.

