

Arts 'crucial' to reducing poor health and inequality

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Engaging in artistic activities such as singing and dancing from a young age can reduce social inequalities and encourage healthy behaviours, according to a new report from UCL and the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The study, published today, is the world's largest review to date into the [health](#) benefits of the arts. The paper reviews over 3,000 studies and highlights the importance of involving the arts sector in health delivery and [health policy](#) for all countries in the WHO European region.

Lead author, Dr. Daisy Fancourt (Associate Professor of Psychobiology & Epidemiology, UCL Epidemiology and Health Care) said: "Much of the research in this area has focused on the role of the arts in the treatment of illness.

"This report also highlights that engagement with the arts can affect social determinants of health, improving social cohesion and reducing [social inequalities](#) and inequities. Crucially, the arts can support the prevention of illness and promotion of good health."

In terms of treating ill-health the arts have been found to reduce psychological and biological markers of stress and improve immune response. For people with neurodevelopmental and neurological disorders and [non-communicable diseases](#) (including cancer, respiratory disease and cardiovascular conditions) engaging with the arts has been found to improve [mental health](#) and physical function.

The report also focusses on how the arts can improve engagement with primary healthcare. For example, doctor's surgeries that have visual art on walls have been found to reduce patient anxiety and calming music in dental surgeries can help anxiety, blood pressure and stress hormones.

"As well as helping patients or those with health problems to recover or better manage their illness, we see engagement with the arts having a significant positive health benefit from a young age.

"The arts have an important role to play in early years as well as throughout our life-course. In this study, we see many examples of programmes which have specifically helped more vulnerable children to manage anxiety and aggression as well as increased school attendance and self-esteem.

"Additionally large-scale community-based music programmes amongst children exposed to violence have been found to improve self-control and reduce behavioural difficulties," added Dr. Fancourt.

The researchers says the report leads to a number of policy recommendations for the WHO and member states. These include ensuring arts provision in communities is accessible and supporting arts organisations in making health and wellbeing part of their strategies.

Dr. Piroska Östlin, WHO Regional Director for Europe (ad interim), said: "Bringing art into people's lives through activities including dancing, singing, and going to museums and concerts offers an added dimension to how we can improve physical and mental health."

"The examples cited in this groundbreaking WHO report show ways in which the arts can tackle 'wicked' or complex health challenges such as diabetes, obesity and mental ill health. They consider health and well-being in a broader societal and community context, and offer solutions

that common medical practice has so far been unable to address effectively."

Provided by University College London

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