

Frequently Asked Questions

Volunteering to support healthy and active ageing

What does 'active' ageing mean?

Across the globe, attention is growing on keeping people well as they age. Partly this is to do with our growing ageing population. Partly this is to do with individual choice – people want to stay in their own homes for as long as possible as they age.

One of the best ways to look after the wishes of individuals and meet the needs of the community is for older people to maintain good health.

Information about health tells us that good health comes from keeping active, maintaining good nutrition and keeping up good lifestyle habits – like being sunsmart.

Nowadays, we also think about being 'active' in a broader sense – being actively part of ones' community, actively making decisions about one's own life and keeping active mentally.

What does 'active ageing' mean for the people we work with?

This focus on active ageing means that we want to support older people to stay active and independent in their homes for as long as possible. Not so long ago, we thought 'doing things for' people was best. The thinking nowadays is not to rush in to do everything for our clients. For example, when cleaning people's homes, sometimes staff will just be beside the person as they do their own dusting. Simple as it sounds, this means the client is taking an active role in their own home, doing some of their own housework. They feel better and they are keeping active.



Not all of our clients can do as much as they would like. But it is still important that they are making their own choices as far as possible.

But I volunteered so I can help people...isn't this needed anymore?

Yes - volunteers are a vital component of Home and Community Care services provided across Victoria. The key message for volunteers is to support older people staying as active as they possibly can. Volunteers play a fantastic role by 'being beside' clients - taking them out in the community, chatting with them, driving them to places they would not otherwise get to, making sure they have a meal delivered to them after a stay in hospital. Without this volunteer support, many people would not be able to stay in their own homes.

So...volunteers are very much needed. But sometimes the best thing a volunteer can do is nothing! Staying near the person and supporting them to look after themselves is great for everybody.

I've been volunteering for twenty years. Was all that work a waste of time?

Not at all. No doubt you did many different things over that time. You will have seen many changes take place in that time. Volunteering is an area that has been changing.

The contributions of volunteers are just as important now as they ever were. But the emphasis is less on doing things for people as helping them to do it for themselves.



I've just started volunteering...What does this mean for me?

New volunteers can bring in some great new ideas. The message is the same for new volunteers – it's about 'doing with' people rather than 'doing things for' them. As a new volunteer, you may have some ideas about new activities we can organise with the people in our HACC services or new ways our organisation can do things.

But everyone is so busy...Isn't it easier for me to just do it?

We are all busy and under time pressures unfortunately. This is exactly how volunteers can make a difference. Where staff might be pressured for time, volunteers can spend those extra minutes with one or two people, helping them serve themselves or walk up the steps or get out of the car.

Of course, it is often easier for someone else to do the task – but that's not the point, is it? HACC services are 'about the client', doing what's best for them.



I don't want to do something that's dangerous for the client.

No – and the organisation strongly agrees with you! It's important that you are aware that the organisation has assessed the client to see what they are capable of doing and what they want to do. The things we ask you to do are part of the client's care plan.

We also make sure that we monitor clients, to check whether these ideas change for any reason.

We keep this information in the client's care plan.

As a volunteer, you are not expected to do anything that you feel is risky for the client or for you.

We also require that you tell us what you observe about the client. If you think someone is struggling with a task, make sure you let your supervisor know. It may be that the person needs to be assessed again and a new care plan developed.

Our clients like to be looked after. What's wrong with that?

Essentially there is nothing wrong with 'being looked after'. We can all relate to that feeling!

However, it is really important to encourage people to be as active in managing their own lives as possible – and to keep this up on a daily basis.

One way to think about this is to recall a time when you were out of action – maybe just with a bad flu, or after surgery or having children even. Can you remember what it felt like, trying to get back on your feet? You can literally feel dizzy and need to take time to get back to feeling strong and healthy if you've stopped doing things for a week or so.

Older people are often less able to stretch or to lift heavy things. This can lead to people doing less and less. Gradually these restrictions can start to affect basic day-to-day activities.

Rather than thinking of 'looking after' people as waiting on them, think of looking after people as encouraging them to keep as active as possible. Volunteers can make people feel special. In fact, you can play a great role in encouraging and motivating people, and giving them confidence.



Does 'active' always mean doing something physical?

No, not at all. It can be something mentally active – like playing a game of chess or backgammon or reading a book or discussing a newspaper article. It can be talking about a piece of music or reminiscing. We think about being active on a physical, social and emotional levels. Maybe another way to think about it is the opposite of inactive!

For further discussion

- Do you have any other questions?
- What do longer-term volunteers see as the differences between now and when they first started volunteering? And what remains the same?
- What are some approaches you have developed for working with people who prefer the volunteer to 'do things for' them?