

Abstract for BSPS:

Marital status and subsequent changes in physical capability in England among men and women aged 60+

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Maintaining physical capability at older ages is important given the ageing population. Evidence suggests that married people have better physical capability than their unmarried counterparts, however most evidence is cross-sectional with little research on subsequent changes in physical capability. This paper aims to investigate the association between marital status and changes in physical capability over a ten year period among people aged 60+ in England.

Using six waves of the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, marital status was captured in 2002 and physical capability was measured at six time points using the measure of walking speed, in metres per second (m/s). Growth curve models were run using STATA.

Overall married men and women had the slowest decline in walking speed over the 10 year period. After adjusting for demographic, socio-economic and health characteristics widowed and never married men had a walking speed which declined by 0.05 m/s more over the period than men who were in their first marriage, whilst widowed and never married women had a walking speed which declined 0.07 m/s and 0.05 m/s, respectively, more than women in their first marriage. Divorced men also had greater declines in walking speed over the period than married men, which was explained by their demographic and socio-economic characteristics.

Findings suggest that marriage may protect long term physical capability, although much of the association remained unexplained and it's possible that circumstances in earlier life may select and retain men and women in marriage, resulting in a slower decline in physical capability.