

Starting to get crowded in 100-year-olds' club

July 19 2009, By HOPE YEN , Associated Press Writer



FILE -- In this March 6, 2008, file photo, President Bush meets with World War I veteran Army Cpl. Frank Woodruff Buckles, 107, from Charles Town, W.Va., in the Oval Office of the White House in Washington. (AP Photo/Charles Dharapak, File)

(AP) -- It's starting to get crowded in the 100-year-olds' club. Once virtually nonexistent, the world's population of centenarians is projected to reach nearly 6 million by midcentury. That's pushing the median age toward 50 in many developed nations and challenging views of what it means to be old and middle-age.

The number of centenarians already has jumped from an estimated few thousand in 1950 to more than 340,000 worldwide today, with the highest concentrations in the U.S. and Japan, according to the latest Census Bureau figures. Their numbers are projected to grow at more than 20 times the rates of the total population by 2050, making them the

fastest growing age segment.

Demographers attribute booming long-livers to decades of medical advances and improved diets, which have reduced heart disease and stroke. Genetics and lifestyle also play a factor. So, too, do doctors who are more willing to aggressively treat the health problems of people once considered too old for such care.

"My parents are 86 and 87 and they're going strong, with my dad driving all over the place, so I've already told my financial planners that I'm going to live to at least 96," said Susan Ryckman, 61, as she walked around New York City, an iPod and iPhone in hand.

"As long as I'm not mentally and physically infirm, I'd like to live as long as I can," she said.

Japan, known for its low-fat staple of fish and rice, will have the most centenarians in 2050 - 627,000, or nearly 1 percent of its total population, according to census estimates.

Japan pays special respect to the elderly and has created a thriving industry in robotics - from dogs and nurses to feeding machines - to cater to its rapidly [aging population](#).

Italy, Greece, Monaco and Singapore, aided by their temperate climates, also will have sizable shares of centenarians, most notably among women.

In the U.S., centenarians are expected to increase from 75,000 to more than 600,000 by midcentury. Those primarily are baby boomers hitting the 100-year mark. Their population growth could add to rising government costs for the strained Medicare and Social Security programs.

"The implications are more than considerable, and it depends on whether you're healthy or sick," said Dr. Robert N. Butler, president and chief executive of the International Longevity Center, a New York-based nonprofit group specializing in aging. "Healthy centenarians are not a problem, and many are. But if you have a demented, frail centenarian, they can be very expensive."

Butler predicted a surge in demand in the U.S. for nursing homes, assisted living centers and other special housing, given the wave of aging boomers who will be at increased risk for Alzheimer's disease. He said federal and state governments may have to reevaluate retirement benefits, age limits on driving and Medicare coverage as they struggle to redefine what it means to be old.

"We don't have a major coordinating figure such as a White House counselor to reach across all departments, and we need one," Butler said.

Census estimates show:

- Come 2017, it will be the first time there will be more people 65 and older than there will be kids younger than 5.
- Due to low birth rates, Japan's median age will increase from 37 in 1990 to 55 by 2050. The median age for the world during that same period will rise from 24 to 37, slowed by younger populations in Latin America and Africa.
- The median age in the U.S. will edge higher from 33 to 39 during that period, kept low by higher rates of immigration.

In the U.S., experts say rising rates of obesity for people who are more sedentary or eat too much junk food could take a toll on life expectancy. AARP and other groups are trying to promote healthier lifestyles.

AARP is conducting a 10-month pilot project in Albert Lea, Minn., aimed at extending the life span of residents by two years. The group is working with the city to make it easier to get around on foot or bike, develop social networks and provide healthier fast-food options, and is hoping to expand the effort to other cities.

A recent Pew Research Center poll of 2,969 adults found that Americans, on average, would like to live to 89; the current life span is 78. One in five people would like to live past 90, while 8 percent would like to pass the century mark.

"Our motto is that dancing boomers are forever young," said Julie Dahlman, 62, co-founder of a 300-member boomers social club in Portland, Ore., that hosts dances, golf outings, hikes and wine tastings. Dahlman said that after caring for a 92-year-old mother with Alzheimer's, she knew it was important to live life to its fullest.

"I'm silly with my girlfriends, and we still have a slumber party once in a while," Dahlman said. "We're not going to go away quietly."

On the Net:

National Institute on Aging: <http://www.nia.nih.gov/>

Census Bureau: <http://www.census.gov/>

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