

People entering their 60s may have more disabilities today than in prior generations

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(PhysOrg.com) -- In a development that could have significant ramifications for the nation's health care system, Baby Boomers may well be entering their 60s suffering far more disabilities than their counterparts did in previous generations, according to a new UCLA study. The findings, researchers say, may be due in part to changing American demographics.

In the study, which will be published in the January 2010 issue of the [American Journal of Public Health](#), researchers from the division of geriatrics at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA found that the cohort of individuals between the ages of 60 and 69 exhibited increases in several types of [disabilities](#) over time. By contrast, those between the ages of 70 and 79 and those aged 80 and over saw no significant increases — and in some cases exhibited fewer disabilities than their previous cohorts.

While the study focused on groups born prior to the post-World War II Baby Boom, the findings hold "significant and sobering implications" for health care because they suggest that people now entering their 60s could have even more disabilities, putting an added burden on an already fragile system and boosting health costs for society as a whole, researchers say.

If this is true, it's something we need to address," said Teresa Seeman, UCLA professor of medicine and epidemiology and the study's principal investigator. "If this trend continues unchecked, it will put increasing

pressure on our society to take care of these disabled individuals. This would just put more of a burden on the [health care](#) system to address the higher levels of these problems."

The researchers used two sets of data — the National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys (NHANES) for 1988-94 and 1999-2004 — to examine how disabilities for the three groups of adults aged 60-69, 70-79, and 80 and older had changed over time. They assessed disability trends in four areas: basic activities associated with daily living, such as walking from room to room and getting into and out of bed; instrumental activities, such as performing household chores or preparing meals; mobility, including walking one-quarter mile or climbing 10 steps without stopping for rest; and functional limitations, which include stooping, crouching or kneeling.

The study focused primarily on trends for the more recent 60-69 age group — those born between 1930 and 1944, just before the start of the Baby Boom, whose data was included in the 1999-2004 NHANES. In particular, researchers felt this group could offer insights into the health of the Boomers following them, who are now entering their 60s.

The researchers found that between the periods 1988-94 and 1999-2004, disability among those in their 60s increased between 40 and 70 percent in each area studied except functional limitations, independent of sociodemographic characteristics, health status and behaviors, and relative weight. The increases were considerably higher among non-white and overweight subgroups.

By contrast, the researchers found no significant changes among the group aged 70 to 79, while the 80-plus group actually saw a drop in functional limitations.

One reason for this uptick, researchers say, is that disabilities may be

linked with the changing racial and ethnic makeup of the group that recently reached or will soon be reaching its 60s, with the most rapid growth projected to be among African Americans and Hispanics — groups with significantly higher rates of obesity and lower socioeconomic status, both of which are associated with higher risk for [functional limitations](#) and disabilities.

The researchers note that their controls for differences in sociodemographics, health status (such as chronic conditions and biological risk factors) and health behavior do not completely explain the increase in disability trends among the 60- to 69-year olds. Still, the trends within that group "are disturbing," Seeman said.

"Increases in disability in that group are concerning because it's a big group," she said. "These may be people who have longer histories of being overweight, and we may be seeing the consequences of that. We're not sure why these disabilities are going up. But if this trend continues, it could have a major impact on us, due to the resources that will have to be devoted to those people."

Source: University of California - Los Angeles

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