

U.S. comes up short on living longer

June 27 2011, By Lindy Washburn

Helen DeSanctis was born in Paterson, N.J., the same year silk workers struck at more than 100 mills, Roald Amundsen reached the South Pole and William Howard Taft served as president of the United States. Her predicted life expectancy at birth: 53 years.

DeSanctis far exceeded expectations: This year, she celebrated her 100th birthday.

Impeccably dressed, flirtatious and sharp at a birthday party for her and seven other centenarians at the Christian Health Care Center in Wyckoff, N.J., last week, the former Fair Lawn, N.J., resident noted that she "never had any problems with anybody," "took care of myself," and "has a wonderful family." She didn't overeat, she said. She still exercises.

They are words to consider as the [United States](#) confronts the fact that the life expectancy of its citizens falls far short of those in other industrialized countries - and lags further behind each year. Even though the United States spends more on health care than any other country, too few Americans can reasonably look forward to the healthy old age of Helen DeSanctis.

A baby girl born in the United States in 2007 can expect to live almost to 81 on average, compared with 86.2 years in Japan, the nation with the longest life expectancy for women. A baby boy born here should live to just past 75. In Iceland, he could live to 80.2.

The U.S. ranks 37th in life expectancy, behind Italy, France, Spain,

Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, Greece, Japan and Canada.

Looked at county by county in the United States, the picture is "even more stark and disturbing," according to research released this month by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington.

The range of [life expectancies](#) across counties is stunning: more than 15 years for men, and more than 12 years for women. It ranges from a low of 65.9 years for men in Holmes County, Miss., to a high of 81.1 years for men in Fairfax County, Va., and from 73{ years for women in Holmes County to 86 for women in Collier County, Fla.

"Despite the fact that the U.S. spends more per capita than any other nation on health, eight out of 10 counties are not keeping pace in terms of health outcomes," said Christopher Murray, co-author of the paper "Falling behind: life expectancy in US counties from 2000 to 2007 in an international context."

Nationwide, black men have the lowest life expectancy, the study found, though the gap with whites has narrowed over the years. The life expectancy for black men in two-thirds of American counties in 2007 was the same as that of the top 10 [industrialized countries](#) more than 50 years ago.

Part of the explanation for America's poor performance lies in the lack of preventive care and the high rates of chronic illness, experts say.

"We have 30 (million) or 40 million uninsured people," said Dr. Knight Steel, chairman emeritus of the gerontology department at Hackensack University Medical Center. "They don't seek out health care soon enough."

In northern New Jersey, the overall picture is not as bleak. Bergen County ranked 22nd for men's and women's life expectancies in 2007, among the nation's more than 2,300 counties. In fact, Bergen County males are ahead of those in the top 10 healthiest countries internationally, unusual among American counties.

Passaic County ranked 431 for men and 499 for women among the nation's counties.

The state's biggest improvements in life expectancy for men have been seen in Bergen and Passaic and other northern counties, including Hudson and Essex. For women, the biggest improvements were seen in Bergen and Hudson counties.

Across the United States, men and women could add at least four years to the average life expectancy by addressing four key health problems: smoking, high blood pressure, diabetes and obesity, the study said. Together with physical inactivity, high cholesterol and alcohol use, they cause nearly 1 million premature deaths a year.

"It really is interesting that things that are so simple are so valuable," said Steel, who was chief of the World Health Organization's Health of the Elderly Program before coming to Hackensack. "If I could get everybody to stop smoking, have their blood pressure taken care of, have women get a Pap smear and mammogram, everybody get a flu shot and maybe a colonoscopy, I'd save a lot of lives."

Across the nation - and at the Christian Health Care Center - women live longer than men. Six of the eight [centenarians](#) at Helen DeSanctis' party were women, including the eldest, 104-year-old Lillian Cozens.

One of the men was Vito Scimeca, 101, whose wife, Beatrice - she requested that her age be given only as 90-something - attended the party

with their daughter Joan Esposito, with whom she lives in Glen Rock, N.J.

"I eat the right things, I don't drink, and I keep the fats out," said Scimeca. "I never go overboard on anything; I keep to a happy medium."

Scimeca's proudest moment was his retirement ceremony from the Bayonne Naval Yard after 30 years. He served with the Army in Okinawa during World War II. He and his wife were active for many years in the Ridgefield seniors group, their daughter said, which kept them active, independent, and engaged with friends.

Among the study's other findings:

- A girl born in 2007 in Bergen County can expect to live to 83.5, and a boy to 79 and four months.

- In Passaic County, the life expectancy for girls is just over 81 years and for boys 76 years and four months.

- The gap between men and women is narrowing in Bergen and Passaic counties. Girls born in 2007 will outlive men by 4.3 years in Bergen County, compared with 5.7 years 20 years ago. In Passaic, girls will outlive boys by 4.7 years, down from 6.7 years two decades ago.

- Among the states, women in Hawaii have the longest [life expectancy](#) - 84.1 - while men in Minnesota can expect to live the longest - 78 years.

- Women in Afghanistan have the shortest life spans - 43.5. Among men, it is Zimbabwe, 42.6

At the Christian [Health Care](#) Center in Wyckoff, Douglas Struyk, president and CEO, thanked the residents for sharing the lessons of their

long lives as they also marked the institution's 100th anniversary.

Mary Swist, one of the celebrants, enjoyed the cake, but she didn't take the occasion too seriously.

"Oh, that," she said of her 101st birthday. "That's just a number."

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