

Americans aren't hitting their prime till after 65

July 4 2011, By Janice Lloyd

Whether you are a twentysomething, Gen Xer or Baby Boomer, the older crew has an edge on you, according to new research.

A massive poll looking at American attitudes, health and behaviors concludes that people over age 65 consistently have a higher degree of [wellbeing](#) than any other age group. At the bottom: those 45 to 64.

"We're not surprised at the findings," says Lynn O'Connor, 69, who lives with her husband, Roy, 74, in Greenspring, a retirement community in Springfield, Va., in the Washington area.

"We're both healthy, we are social, active and we have our family nearby. We're engaged in pursuits we enjoy."

Even when aches and pains set in and health begins to decline, the older group also is less sad and depressed than any other group, according to the Gallup-Healthways Wellbeing index. The findings are based on more than 1 million surveys done since 2008. Healthways works with [health care professionals](#) to help people thrive and to allow officials to track health and wellness by congressional districts.

"Improve well-being, and productivity goes up and [health care costs](#) come down," says Ben Leedle, president of Healthways. "We want to learn from the older generation's patterns and make those patterns important parts of all of our lives, regardless of the age group."

If younger people can change, the benefits could be huge, he says. However, if they don't adopt healthier ways, they are not likely to do as well as these seniors, and they'll be less well for longer because of longer [life expectancies](#).

What does wellness look like to Healthways? Multiple behaviors, from smiling and laughing to having access to learn new things and - no surprise here - eating well and getting plenty of exercise. The older group outscored all groups in healthy behaviors, including not smoking.

According to the Healthways research, middle-aged Americans suffer the lowest well-being due in part to higher [obesity rates](#), higher levels of chronic disease - including depression - and more reports of smoking.

The O'Connors are slim and toned. They're champions of the healthy behaviors: They eat well and exercise every day.

"It's hard to fit exercise in while you're working," says Roy. "But it's really necessary to do. It's always been a part of my routine."

Both O'Connors have regular tee times at a nearby golf course - she took it up six years ago when she was 63, at his request. "We play 18 holes, and we walk the entire course," says Roy, adding that he wore a pedometer one day and accumulated 11,000 steps - more than 6 miles - for all his activities.

They also enjoy an indoor racquet game called pickleball, which they took up when they moved to Greenspring. And they are regulars at the health club, where they swim and lift weights.

But they haven't always been angels, they say.

While exercise has always been a joy for the O'Connors, healthy eating

came later in life. In fact, that took an "attitude adjustment."

"I was not a good eater," says Lynn. "Every year, I was gaining another pound. And then I started to see it in places I'd never seen it before."

Off to Weight Watchers for her in 1999. She slowly lost 30 pounds, and has kept it off, by eating better and staying close to Weight Watchers.

"Now, I know how to eat properly," she says. "But it took time to learn, and I still have to weigh in every month. I also stay away from desserts as much as I can."

Another key part of the wellness picture among those over 65: better emotional lives. The O'Connors made changes in their life to find the right balance.

When they wanted to see their four children and nine grandchildren in the Washington area, they had to drive more than 500 miles from Lexington, Ky.

"We wanted to be near them," says Lynn. "We traded off living on a farm in a five-bedroom house to an apartment in a community. I used to have multiple gardens to tend. Roy would spend hours mowing.

"Now, I focus on a single flower bed on my patio and have time for other important things."

That means volunteering and finding other ways to improve their community. Once a week, they're on duty at the Kennedy Center's information booth. Lynn is also a mentor to families with financial problems.

Don't have time? Leedle believes other [age groups](#) have to find time, or

[health care](#) costs will soar in a country where one in five people will be 65 or older in 2050.

"We find a 40-year-old male working 12-14 hours a day, supporting a family with several kids," he says.

"We tell him to stop and try to incubate the wisdom of our seniors into his life. They need to learn how to weave that into their routines so it becomes part of the chaos that is the middle of our lives."

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