

The new old age -- today's pensioners are very different to yesterday's

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Old people today have more sex, are more likely to be divorced, are cleverer and feel better, reveals a long-term research project comparing what it is like to be old today with 30 years ago. "It's time to start talking about the 'new old age'," says researcher Ingmar Skoog.

The number of elderly is rising worldwide, and it is estimated that [average life expectancy](#) in Europe will reach 100 by the end of the century.

At the same time, old age and what we expect from it are changing. An extensive research project at the University of Gothenburg's Sahlgrenska Academy has spent a number of years comparing the elderly of the 1970s with those of today. The project, known as the H70 study, reveals that old age has changed drastically in a number of ways.

For example, the proportion of elderly with schooling beyond secondary level has risen from 14% to almost 40% for both genders. This is reflected in a better performance in [intelligence tests](#) by today's 70-year-olds than their counterparts back in the 1970s.

The proportion of married people has increased, as has the proportion of divorcees. The elderly are also now more sexually active, and the number with [sexual problems](#) such as impotence has fallen.

The results of the long-term study can also be contradictory, not least when it comes to [social networking](#):

"The H70 study shows that the elderly are more outgoing today than they were in the 1970s – they talk more to their neighbours, for example – yet the percentage of elderly who feel lonely has increased significantly," says professor Ingmar Skoog from the University of Gothenburg's Sahlgrenska Academy, who leads the study.

Old people's mental health does not seem to have changed, however. Dementia disorders are no more prevalent today than they were 30 years ago, and while more old people consider themselves to be mildly depressed, more severe forms of depression have not become more common. Meanwhile the elderly are coping better with everyday life: the number needing help with cleaning has fallen from 25% to 12%, and only 4% need help taking a bath, down from 14% in the 1970s.

"Our conclusion is that pensioners are generally healthier and perkier today than they were 30 years ago," says Skoog. "This may be of interest both in the debate about where to set the retirement age and in terms of the baby boomers now hitting retirement age."

The H70 study in Gothenburg began back in 1971. More than 1,000 70-year-old men and women born in 1901-02 were examined by doctors and interviewed about their lives to obtain a picture of diseases in elderly populations, risk factors and their functional capacity and social networks. The participants were examined again at the age of 75 and then at regular intervals until the final participant died at the [age](#) of 105. The year 2000 brought the start of a new study of 70-year-olds born in 1930, who were examined using the same methods, making it possible to follow a specific generation through life and compare different generations.

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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