

Boomers' health fails to measure up to parents'

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Study finds higher rates of chronic disease, disability and lower self-rated health.

(HealthDay)—The baby boom is turning out to be a health bust. Despite growing up at a time of great innovation in health care, the 78 million people born in the United States between 1946 and 1964 aren't looking all that healthy today, according to a new study.

Medical advances have led to the longest life expectancy ever, but U.S. [baby boomers](#) have higher rates of chronic disease, more disability and lower self-rated health than did their [parents](#) at a comparable age.

The research may surprise many baby boomers, who have embraced activities such as running, fitness classes and backpacking in unprecedented numbers.

"There seems to be somewhat of a disconnect between the reputation of

baby boomers for being healthy and what we see in increasing rates of diabetes, high [blood pressure](#) and obesity," said study author Dr. Dana King, a professor of [family medicine](#) at West Virginia University School of Medicine. "It's really discouraging that they're not the healthiest generation."

The study, published as a research letter Feb. 4 in *JAMA* [Internal Medicine](#), compared data on people aged 46 to 64 in two time periods—from 1988 to 1994 for the older generation, and from 2007 to 2010 for the baby boomers.

While 32 percent of their parents' generation described their health as "excellent," only about 13 percent of baby boomers did so.

Obesity was more common among baby boomers than their parents (39 percent versus 29 percent). In addition, 52 percent of boomers said they had no [regular physical activity](#), while only 17 percent in their parents' generation reported inactivity.

There was one area of good news, however. Boomers have lower rates of [heart attack](#) and emphysema, and are less likely to smoke cigarettes, the study reported. King noted that the reduction in smoking—from 28 percent of the population to 21 percent—shows the value of conducting a concerted [public health campaign](#). He said the nation needs to focus the same amount of effort now on obesity to discover truly effective solutions.

The findings didn't surprise some experts.

"Obesity seems to be the underlying cause of many of the health issues baby boomers are facing," said Nancy Copperman, a registered dietitian and director of public health initiatives at North Shore-LIJ Health System, in Great Neck, N.Y. "I wasn't surprised to see the data because

we've seen the obesity epidemic over the past two to three decades really increase, and with that heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure."

The study tapped data from the U.S. National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey. Factors used to compare the two generations included health status, functional and work disability, healthy lifestyle characteristics, and presence of chronic disease.

The baby boomer generation had a higher percentage of people with high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes and obesity than did their parents' generation.

Disability was defined conservatively, said King. "To be considered disabled you had to be walking only with an assistance device, such as a cane, or only able to climb up 10 steps, have trouble stooping down, or walking a quarter of a mile," he explained. Again, boomers consistently had a higher level of disability than their parents' generation.

So what was the previous generation doing right? "There was a huge difference in their typical amount of exercise," said King. "Fifty percent were getting moderate physical activity 12 times a month, while just 35 percent of baby boomers got that much exercise."

The research also showed that medication use for [high blood pressure](#) was higher among baby boomers, and prescription drug use for high cholesterol was 10 times greater among the younger generation than among the previous generation. Of course, many of the medications boomers take were not widely available when their parents were of similar age.

Do boomers rely too much on medications to solve their health issues? "I'm concerned that has a great deal to do with the problem," said King. "The drugs are supposed to be used in addition to a healthy lifestyle, not

instead of it."

Baby boomers are definitely moving less than their parents did, said Copperman. "Our parents didn't have the conveniences we have. Now, often both parents are working and spending less time doing manual labor. Instead of mowing the lawn or cleaning the house, they might hire someone to do it," she noted.

But King said it's still not too late for baby boomers to get healthier. He said his previous research showed that it is possible to "turn back the clock" even in one's 50s and 60s.

More information: For more information about healthy living, visit the [U.S. National Library of Medicine](#).

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