

Americans enjoying more healthy years

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Study found 2-year lifespan gain, fewer disease symptoms.

(HealthDay)—Americans are living longer and healthier lives than ever before, according to a new study.

Researchers analyzed government data collected over the last three decades and found that people today can expect to have two more years of healthy living than they could just a generation ago.

The data also revealed that people are reporting fewer disease symptoms and less trouble with everyday activities such as standing and walking. This was true for all groups examined in the study: blacks, whites, females and males.

"What we're talking about in this study is not simply [life expectancy](#), but quality-adjusted life expectancy," Susan Stewart, a researcher at the

National Bureau of Economic Research, said in a Harvard University news release.

"Many studies have measured this in different ways, but this is really the first time we've been able to measure it in the entire U.S. population using such a rich measure over a long period," Stewart explained.

The study was published Sept. 12 in the *American Journal of Public Health*.

"Ironically, many of the clearest gains have come at older ages, where people were once disabled by things like vision problems and [cardiovascular disease](#)," David Cutler, a professor of applied economics and a professor in the Harvard department of global health and population, said in the news release.

"Those conditions today are far more treatable than they were in the past, so what we're left with at the very oldest ages are things like Alzheimer's and [dementia](#), while at younger ages we're seeing problems that appear to be related to a sedentary lifestyle," Cutler noted.

He said some of the improvements found in the study are almost certainly the result of improvements in health care.

"There are a number of conditions, such as [heart disease](#), that used to be very, very impairing. It used to be that after a severe [heart attack](#), people would essentially be bedridden, or they would wind up in nursing homes. We're not seeing that very much anymore," Cutler said.

Instead, chronic, degenerative conditions that are mostly untreatable, such as Alzheimer's, have taken the place of treatable diseases, he noted.

"We're coming to where those are the dominant health issues reported

for the elderly, rather than heart disease or stroke-related impairment," Cutler said.

Along with the good news, the researchers also uncovered some troubling trends in younger age groups. Since 2001, anxiety has become an increasing problem among young and middle-aged Americans, and walking difficulties have seen a significant increase among the nonelderly population, the study authors noted.

The study provides insight into the past and current state of the health care system, but its value will increase over the next few years as provisions of the new health reform law are implemented as part of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), according to Cutler.

"Part of the reason we want to do this type of study is because we need to know what's happening to the [health](#) of the population," he said. "That information is valuable in and of itself, but it's also important that we have a baseline that we can use to measure whether and how things change once the ACA goes into effect."

More information: The American Academy of Family Physicians outlines what you can do to [maintain your health](#).

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