

Americans are living longer, but not as long as other countries

January 10 2014, by Nancy Churnin

The good news is Americans are living longer. The bad is that we're not living as long as people in other countries.

American longevity has dropped significantly since 1979 compared with longevity elsewhere, according to a 2006 report from the National Academy of Sciences.

American men live to an average age of 75, about four years less than Australians and Japanese, who live to an average of 79. American women have made the biggest comparative drop, going from being the longest-lived in the 1960s to the 28th today.

Japanese women pulled ahead between 1980 and 2006 to an average 86 years, with Italian and French women living to an average of 84 years. During this same time period, American women edged up to an average of 80.

There's no agreed-upon reason for this, according to a 2011 report from the National Institutes for Health. But researchers do cite a tantalizing clue: Americans seem to have their highest vulnerability between the ages of 55 and 75. These are the years when we die from [heart disease](#), diabetes and lung disease more often than those in other countries.

If Americans make it past 75, they not only have the same chance to live a long life, but they have shot at joining the ranks of the increasing numbers extending their lives into their 90s and even 100s.

Experts say people are particularly vulnerable from 55 to 75 because this is when the cumulative effects of poor nutrition, lack of exercise and lack of screenings can converge. Poor lifestyle choices can lead to clogged arteries, [high blood pressure](#), insulin resistance and cancers spotted too late for effective treatment.

Obesity is the No. 1 driver of ill health, as far as Dr. Diana Kerwin is concerned. Kerwin, chief of geriatrics at Texas Health Dallas, also blames Americans' sedentary lifestyle for driving up the increase in fatal diseases.

She points with pride to her patient Louise Yoss, 78, of Dallas, a regular at the Silver Sneakers exercise class at the Aaron Family Jewish Community Center in Dallas. Yoss started working out at 74. Kerwin says Yoss is improving her odds of a healthy future with exercise and [healthy food choices](#).

Heart disease remains the leading cause of death for men and women in the United States, killing 1 of 4 of both genders, according to a 2009 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A contributing factor to women's deaths in particular is a lack of awareness of the symptoms of heart attacks in females, which can lead to critical time elapsing before seeking lifesaving care.

While both men and women can experience the telltale shortness of breath, pressure or pain in the lower chest or upper abdomen or extreme fatigue or dizziness, women are more likely to dismiss the symptoms as acid reflux, the flu or aging.

Smoking can aggravate diseases or make health problems worse. Experts are encouraged that the percentage of American smokers dropped from 18.9 percent to 18 percent in 2012, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. However, that's still too many, says Dr. Mitchell

Magee, medical director of the CLEAR (Chest Lung Evaluation & Resource) Clinic and surgical director of thoracic oncology at Medical City Dallas.

Plus, many don't realize they're at risk for lung cancer even if they don't smoke, Magee says.

Women seem to be at particular risk for this disease. While the rate of new lung cancer cases has dropped 22 percent for men over the past 33 years, it has risen for women by 106 percent, according to the American Cancer Society. Lung cancer has a greater mortality rate than any other cancer, causing more deaths in women than breast, uterine and ovarian cancer combined.

The median age for a person to receive a diagnosis of lung cancer is 65, and 20 percent of women with the disease have never smoked or had any exposure to smoke.

Magee attributes that to a lack of research and screenings for lung cancer. By the time symptoms occur, it's usually too late to save the patient.

Women who have had other cancers, have had their ovaries removed surgically before menopause or who have hormone replacement after menopause are at higher risk and would benefit from screenings, he says.

HOW TO OVERCOME

Does all this render Americans' relative decline in longevity inevitable or unsolvable? Not according to Dan Buettner's 2008 book "The Blue Zones: Lessons for Living Longer From the People Who've Lived the Longest."

Buettner's book has inspired a program called the Blue Zones Project by Healthways, a company based in Franklin, Tenn.

Emotional and psychological needs are also part of the health and longevity picture, says Joel Spoonheim, executive director for community programs with Healthways. To that end, the Blue Zones Project will offer people more opportunities for social interaction and to discover a new sense of purpose, something that can easily slip away when people retire between 55 and 75.

"People whose lives have a sense of purpose live about seven years longer than those without that. When people hit retirement, they ask, 'Why am I here? Why am I getting up in the morning?'" Spoonheim notes.

For Yoss, her Silver Sneakers class, where she moves to music alongside women who have become like family, answers that question and more.

"Cindy is fabulous," she says of Cindy Dodson, the teacher who stops to check on and praise Yoss as she rests after class.

"It's joyful. I hate to miss it."

HOW TO ADD YEARS TO YOUR LIFE

Want to increase your odds of living a longer, healthier life? Here's what the experts say.

Exercise: 150 minutes per week is optimal, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Sound daunting? A 10-minute brisk walk three times a day, five days a week will give you a total of 150 minutes of moderate-intensity activity.

Eat right: Avoid processed foods, limit sodium and alcohol, drink four to six cups of water daily and eliminate liquid sugars, particularly the kind found in beverages, the Harvard School of Public Health advises.

Harvard nutrition experts recommend a "Healthy Eating Plate" made up one-half vegetables and fruits, one-quarter whole grains and one-quarter healthy proteins, such as fish, poultry, beans and nuts - not red or processed meats, which can raise your chance of getting colorectal cancer.

Don't smoke: If you smoke, one of the single best things you can do for your health and those you love is to quit, according to the National Cancer Institute at the National Institutes for Health. Tobacco smoke causes many types of cancers for smokers and nonsmokers exposed to second-hand smoke.

Get screened: Ask your doctor to update you on the most important screenings for your age, condition and genetic risk factors at your annual wellness exam. Consider tests for blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, vascular disease risk, colon cancer and, for women, mammograms and Pap smears. Don't overlook an annual eye exam, which can reveal early stages of diabetes and hypertension.

Enjoy: There's a clear link between happiness and health, according to a 2011 article from the Harvard School of Public Health. Chronic anger and anxiety can disrupt cardiac function and harm the brain. Conversely, enthusiasm, hopefulness and laughter can help reduce illness and healthfully manage or even ward off heart disease, strokes, diabetes and depression.

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