Americans living longer than ever

January 6 2014, by Steven Reinberg, Healthday Reporter

A child born in 2009 is expected to reach 78.5 years, but one expert says longer life may not mean better life.

(HealthDay)—Americans are living longer than ever and their life expectancy is increasing every year, federal health officials reported Monday.

People born in 2009 can expect to live 78.5 years. That's an increase from just a year before (when life expectancy at birth was 78.1 years). Since these data were collected, life expectancy has increased even more, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website, and now stands at 78.7 years.

"To the extent that we all want a bounty of years in life, this report conveys encouraging news. Life expectancy at birth in the U.S. is rising for all groups," said Dr. David Katz, director of the Yale University

Prevention Research Center. He had no part in the report.

In the years covered by the current report, life expectancy increased for both men and women. For males, life expectancy went from 75.6 years for those born in 2008 to 76 years for those born in 2009. For females, it went from 80.6 years to 80.9 years, according to the report from the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, part of the CDC.

Life expectancy also rose by race—for whites from 78.5 years in 2008 to 78.8 years in 2009; for blacks, from 74 years to 74.5 years; and for Hispanics, from 81 years to 81.2 years, the researchers found.

"But there are some dark clouds swirling around the silver linings of data. Disparities in life expectancy persist, both between women and men, and between whites and blacks," Katz said.

Life expectancy in the United States is still lower than for many developed countries around the world, he said.

"More importantly, this report is only about years in life, not about life in years," Katz said, raising the question of quality of life.

A recent analysis by the Institute of Medicine suggests that increases in life span in the United States are not matched by increases in "health span"—time spent living in good health, Katz said.

"A long life with a high burden of chronic disease—such as diabetes, heart disease and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD)—means more time living with illness and disability," he noted.

Life expectancy is greatly influenced by advances in medicine and the public health system, while the health span is most affected by lifestyle practices, in particular the quality of diet, physical activity and avoiding

tobacco, Katz explained.

"The next chapter in medical advance will need to be as much about lifestyle as medicine if we are to add life to years along with years to life," he said.

More information: To learn more about life expectancy, visit the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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