

10-year jump in life expectancy for rich nations, US lags: OECD

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Credit: Francisco Farias Jr/public domain

Rich countries have gained more than 10 years in life expectancy on

average since 1970, a study released by the OECD said Wednesday, but the United States has slumped to near the bottom.

Averaged across men and women, the US—at 78.8 years—was 27th in life expectancy at birth among the 34 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development in the latest ranking for 2013, it said.

Forty years ago, Americans lived a year longer than the OECD average, but today they have fallen well below the median, it said.

At the same time, the US outstripped other nations in per capita health expenditure, spending two-and-a-half times more than the average within the OECD, which also includes a handful of emerging economies such as Mexico and Turkey.

Life expectancy at birth measures how long someone born today would live if current mortality rates continued to apply. In reality, improvements in medicine means that age spans are likely to increase over time.

Average lifespan across all OECD nations reached 80.5 years in 2013, an increase of more than 10 years since 1970.

A persistent gap in life expectancy between women, who live longer, and men has gradually narrowed from about seven years to five, the study found.

Japan—at 83.4 years—along with Switzerland and Spain topped the charts for life expectancy in 2013, followed by Italy, France and Australia, according to the annual overview of health metrics.

At the bottom of the OECD 34-strong ranking were Slovakia, Hungary

and, in last place, Mexico, where life expectancy was nine years less than in Japan or Spain.

Several factors account for the poor and declining life expectancy in the US, the report said, starting with its weak public health sector and the millions of Americans who remain uninsured.

High income inequality, illegal drug use, along with high rates of obesity, traffic accidents and homicide also push average life spans down.

Looking at major risk factors—smoking, alcohol and obesity—the US ranked last on the obesity index, but was among healthiest nations for tobacco consumption.

Austria, Estonia, France and Hungary scored very poorly across two risk categories: smoking and drinking. Hungarians were the only people to seriously overindulge in all three.

Sweden and Norway were the only countries among the 34 in which all three risk factors remained very low.

Gender gap

Japanese and Italians were virtuous when it came to alcohol and overeating, but fell into the middle of the pack on smoking.

Tobacco intake showed surprising variation across nations.

Iceland is the only country in which more women smoked than men, but the overall rate of tobacco consumption was among the lowest among rich countries.

The largest disparity among OECD nations was in South Korea, where

some 37 percent of men smoked, and less than five percent of women.

Among non-OECD countries included in the report, more than 70 percent of men in Indonesia consumed tobacco compared to three percent of women.

After Indonesia, the countries with the highest rate of smoking among men were Latvia, China, Russia and Greece.

Another category with large differences across countries and between sexes was suicide.

The countries with the lowest rates of suicide—at seven or fewer per 100,000 people—were Turkey, Greece, Mexico, Italy and Israel.

The country with the highest percentage by far of people taking their own lives was South Korea, which averaged 30 per 100,000 people.

For men, however, that figure shot up to nearly 45 per 100,000.

In all nations, the rate of suicide among women was at least twice as low as for men, and in many cases several times lower.

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