

# Living longer and healthier in mind but not in body

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Credit: George Hodan/public domain

Women are now spending fewer years with cognitive impairment but more years with disability compared to 20 years ago, new research has revealed.

Experts have shown that between 1991 and 2011 women's [life expectancy](#) at age 65 increased by 3.6 years but they identified that the

female body doesn't age as well as its mind.

A study by Newcastle University, UK, and the University of Cambridge, UK, published in *The Lancet*, has revealed that women lived approximately 2.5 months less with moderate or [severe cognitive impairment](#) and six months fewer with [mild cognitive impairment](#), such as problems with memory and thinking.

However, this is balanced by the fact that at age 65 females now spend around seven months more with moderate or severe disability and 2.5 years more with mild disability.

Meanwhile, overall men's life expectancy increased by 4.5 years but they had only 1.3 years more with mild disability and there was no increase in the years spent with moderate or severe disability, or mild or worse cognitive impairment.

Professor Carol Jagger, from Newcastle University's Institute for Ageing, led the analysis of the research.

She said: "The big unanswered question is whether our extra years of life are healthy ones and the aim of our research was to investigate how health expectancies at age 65 years and over changed between 1991 and 2011.

"One possibility for the increased years women are living with mild disability might be the rise in obesity levels over the decades, but there may also be particular conditions, or just more multiple diseases, which are a feature of very old age."

The research team compared two rounds of the Cognitive Function and Ageing Study, done in England in 1991 and 2011.

Health expectancy was measured in three ways: self-perceived health, life without disability, and time free from [cognitive impairment](#). For the study a total of 7,635 people aged 65 and over were analysed in Newcastle, Cambridge and Nottingham.

Analysis of the Health Survey for England for those aged 65+ over a similar time period showed problems with vision and hearing did not account for increases in disability.

Nevertheless, stability in self-care activities, like cooking, and increases in mobility limitations, such as walking 200 yards and climbing stairs, may contribute to gains in mild disability.

Professor Carol Brayne, from the University of Cambridge, was overall lead for the study.

She said: "The findings suggest a compression of cognitive morbidity when comparing older people now compared to 20 years ago in England. This is very good news and consistent with our earlier reporting of a reduction in age specific prevalence of dementia across two decades."

Health expectancies are important indicators to monitor population health trends and inequalities internationally, nationally and regionally.

It is necessary for Government to get a clear indication if people are living longer, healthier lives as it can have an impact on the economy, housing and employment opportunities.

Future work will examine the reasons for the increase in years with disability. The researchers will look at which diseases and conditions are responsible for the rise in mild disability and whether patterns prevail across all the regions studied.

Professor Jagger added: "Our findings have important implications for Government, employees and individuals with respect to raising the state pension age and extending working life.

"It is also necessary for community care services and family carers who predominantly support those with mild to moderate disability to enable them to continue living independently."

In most developed countries worldwide life expectancy is increasing at the rate of at least two years every decade, and, for life expectancy at age 60, shows no sign of slowing down.

Newcastle University's Institute for Ageing held a conference today (Tuesday, December 8), which focused on 'The economic and social impact of ageing' - Professor Jagger opened the event.

**More information:** A comparison of health expectancies over two decades in England: results of the Cognitive Function and Ageing Study I and II, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(15\)00947-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(15)00947-2)

Provided by Newcastle University

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