

Why Do Women Live Longer Than Men?

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Americans are living longer than ever according to statistics from the National Center for Health Statistics at the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Data from 2004 shows the life expectancy of Americans was 77.9 years, the highest ever. Women lived an average of 80.4 years compared to 75.2 years for men. What explains the difference in life span for men and women? No, it's not because men are driven to an early death by nagging wives.

In many poor countries around the world such as Bangladesh, a woman could expect to live fewer years than a man primarily due to death from complications of pregnancy and childbirth. Researchers in the *British Medical Journal* note recent improvements worldwide in women's health care will mark 2006 as the first year where women will outlive men all over the world. However women have outlived men in the western world for many years: in Italy since 1889, England since 1841, and Sweden since 1751.

Mother Nature tries to help even out the numbers by giving boys a head start at conception. One hundred and six boys are born for every 100 girls. As time passes male deaths increasingly outnumber women's, so that by the time these babies have reached their thirties, the sexes are approximately equal in number. From that point on, the continuing higher male death rate leaves more women at any given age. If you live to be 95, there will be four women for every man your age.

The gender gap is most pronounced in those who live 100 years or more. Among centenarians worldwide, women outnumber males nine to one. The mortality gap varies during other stages of life too. Between ages 15 and 24 years, men are four to five times more likely to die than women. This time frame coincides with the onset of puberty and an increase in reckless and violent behavior in males. Researchers refer to it as a "testosterone storm." Most deaths in this male group come from motor vehicle accidents, followed by homicide and suicide. After age 24, the difference between male and female mortality narrows until late middle age. In the 55 to 64 year old range, more men than women die, due mainly to heart disease, suicide, car accidents, and illnesses related to smoking and alcohol use.

One contributor to the gender difference in lifespan is the influence of hormones. The male hormone testosterone increases aggressiveness and competitive behavior in young men, which has a direct effect on the rate of accidents with guns and cars. Males engage in more risk-taking behaviors. Having worked in emergency rooms, I've seen plenty of examples where men got themselves in trouble with risky actions. Riding bikes while standing on the seat no-handed, lighting BBQ grills with gasoline, or playing "chicken" throwing knives at each other. You generally don't find



women doing these same kinds of things. Did you ever see old movies of a woman trying to fly off a bridge with feathered wings strapped to her back? Male researchers say women are not risk takers. Female researchers say women have more common sense!

Testosterone also increases levels of harmful cholesterol (low density lipoprotein), raising a male's chance of getting heart disease. Researchers at John Moores University in Liverpool, England, have shown that men's hearts age faster than women's, losing 20-25 percent of their contractile heart muscle tissue between the ages of 20 and 70, while that of the female heart remains undiminished. The good news is that this loss can be reversed simply by regular exercise. Testosterone also tends to suppress the immune system and results in higher death rates among males due to infectious diseases and cancer.

Women, on the other hand, have low levels of testosterone, and are much more influenced by estrogen, the primary female hormone. Kathryn Sandberg, PhD, director of the Center for the Study

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of Sex Differences in Health, Aging, and Disease at Georgetown University Medical Center credits estrogen for much of the benefit in reducing heart disease in women, at least until menopause. Furthermore, women have much higher levels of the hormone oxytocin. This hormone modifies a woman's response to stress. Rather than raise her blood pressure in a "fight or flight" response to adrenalin, she will adopt a less confrontational approach to "tend and befriend." This may be responsible for a lifetime of lower blood pressure and reduced risk of stress induced disease.

Women shouldn't take their longer life expectancy for granted. The 2004 gap in the U.S. life expectancy was the smallest it's been since 1946. Death rates have begun to converge in the past twenty years. Some researchers attribute the convergence to women taking on the behaviors formerly considered the domain of males – smoking, drinking, and working outside the home. For example, deaths from lung cancer have almost tripled in women in the past twenty years due to the ►

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increase in the number of women smoking. One study found that on average, middle age female smokers now live no longer than male smokers.

Whether the average person drinks to excess, smokes, exercises regularly, or eats their vegetables can add or subtract five to ten years from your life. To live an additional thirty years will require knowledge of how to counteract the susceptibility to conditions such as Alzheimer's disease, stroke, and cancer. Studies now going on looking at the genetic makeup of individuals living to be 100 years or more may help to answer those questions.

In their studies of centenarians, Dr. Thomas Perls, a geriatrician at Harvard Medical School, found that a surprising number of women who lived to be 100 or more gave birth in their forties. These 100-year-old women were four times as likely to have given birth in their forties as women born the same year who died at age 73. A study of centenarians in Europe by the Max Plank Institute of Demography in Germany found the same relationship between longevity and childbearing in later years. This does not mean that having a child in middle age makes a woman live longer. Rather, Perls says, "the factors that allow certain older women to bear children – a slow rate of aging and a decreased susceptibility to disease – also improve a woman's chances of living a long time."

The great news is that people are living longer. However, a longer life doesn't always mean a healthier life. While men succumb to fatal illnesses like heart disease, stroke, and cancer, women tend to live on with non-fatal conditions such as arthritis, osteoporosis, and diabetes. Ideally it would be nice to know not only that life expectancy has been extended, but the function and quality of life has been improved in that extended period. There is only so much that modern medical science can do. People who want to live long and healthy lives need to take better care of themselves. You can start extending your life expectancy today by doing a few simple things:

1. Change your waistline. As your belly gets bigger your blood pressure goes up. And abdominal fat increases free lipids and triglycerides that damage your cardiovascular system. Eat more green leafy vegetables, more fiber, and less red meat. Drink more orange juice and dark grape juice and less cola (diet or regular). Avoid salt.
2. Get moving. Regular exercise helps lower your heart rate and blood pressure along with lowering your weight. Commit to exercise at least three times per week for one hour. And make sure you can get eight hours of sleep per day.
3. Hug your honey. Married people live longer than single or divorced people (no it doesn't just seem that way, it's really true.) Holding hands for ten minutes a day and hugging for twenty seconds will lower your blood pressure. And if you can't find someone to hug, get a dog. Studies at the University of Pennsylvania showed a 10-15 point drop in their blood pressure with a friendly dog.
4. Reduce stress. The American Psychological Association estimates that 43 percent of Americans suffer from stress induced health effects such as insomnia, weight gain, chest pains, depression, and fatigue. Research implicates stress in health problems ranging from heart attacks and diabetes to colds and cancer. Smile! Laugh more often. Meditate and pray. Listen to classical music.

You have the power to change your life. **Begin today!** 



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