

Life expectancy in U.S. hits record high

CDC cites declines in deaths from heart disease, cancer, stroke

The Associated Press

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ATLANTA - Declines in death rates from most major causes — including heart disease and cancer — have pushed Americans' life expectancy to a record 77.6 years. Women are still living longer than men, but the gap is narrowing.

Women now have a life expectancy of 80.1 years, 5.3 more than men. That's down from 5.4 years in 2002 and continues a steady decline from a peak difference of 7.8 years in 1979, the National Center for Health Statistics said Monday in its annual mortality report.

Research indicates there also is an increase in active life expectancy, said Mary A. Salmon, a sociology professor at the University of North Carolina.

"It's not that we're having a lot of very old, sick people," she said in a telephone interview.

She added, "There has been lots of speculation on how this will affect Social Security, of course."

Indeed, a major debate topic in Washington and elsewhere is President Bush's plan to change Social Security, which he says is facing a financial crisis caused by increasing life expectancy, lower birth rates and aging baby boomers.

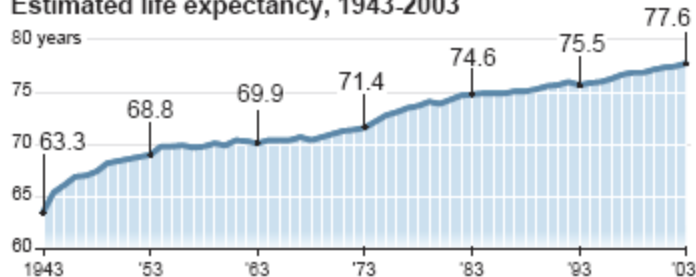
The total number of deaths in the United States in 2003 was 2,443,908, an increase of 521 reflecting a growing overall population.

Most age groups saw a decline in mortality rates. Infant mortality, which increased to 7 per 100,000 in 2002 — the first such rise in decades — was 6.9 in 2003, a change the agency said was not statistically significant.

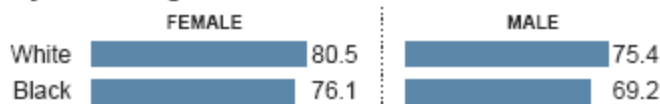
Life expectancy reaches all-time high

Declines in death rates from most major causes have pushed Americans' life expectancy to a record 77.6 years.

Estimated life expectancy, 1943-2003



By race and gender, 2003



SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

AP

Americans still trail other countries

While the overall life expectancy increase to 77.6 was good news, Americans still trail many other countries, according to statistics from the World Health Organization.

In 2002 figures, Japan had the longest life expectancy at 81.9 years, followed by Monaco, 81.2, San Marino and Switzerland, 80.6, Australia, 80.4, Andorra, 80.3, and Iceland, 80.1.

Other countries topping the United States include Austria, Belgium, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Israel, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Singapore, Spain and the United Kingdom.

In 2003, both of the two largest killers of Americans saw declines.

The death rate from heart disease decreased from 240.8 per 100,000 in 2002 to 232.1 in 2003. The cancer death rate declined from 193.5 to 189.3 per 100,000.

Among other major killers, the death rate for stroke dropped 4.6 percent, the death rate from chronic respiratory diseases 0.7 percent, flu and pneumonia 3.1 percent, accidents 2.2 percent and suicides 3.7 percent.

On the other hand, the death rate for Alzheimer's disease was up 5.9 percent, for hypertension 5.7 percent, Parkinson's 3.4 percent and kidney disease 2.1 percent.

The increase in Parkinson's deaths moved it into the top 15 causes of death in the United States, one of the few surprises in the report, according to Robert N. Anderson, chief of the mortality statistics branch at the center. Parkinson's replaced murder among the top causes of death.

Among whites the death rates per 100,000 people declined 2.1 percent for men and 1.2 percent for women; among blacks the rates were down 2.5 percent for men and 2.4 percent for women; Hispanic males had a 4.2 percent drop compared with 1.8 percent for Hispanic women.