
Women live longer than men but suffer more years of poor health

18/03/2016



Life expectancy for women in the US is 81, [five years more than for men](#). It has however been climbing for both genders: in 1995, women and men were expected to live to 79 and 73, respectively.

But the figures show a worrying trend. The health in which women spend their lengthening old age seems to have stopped improving since 2000. Women now account for 57 per cent of [US citizens aged over 65](#), but 68 per cent of those who need daily assistance in their lives.

In the 1980s and 1990s, improvements to medical care delayed the diseases of old age even more than they delayed death, effectively compressing the time old people spent in ill health. But [Vicki Freedman](#) and her colleagues at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, have found that the average health of older men continued to improve after 2000, whereas that of older women did not.

Examining 30 years of health surveys, the team found that 85-year-old men can now expect to have an average of four more years of active, relatively healthy life – up from an average of just two and a half in 1982.

But in women there has been no change. Just as in 1982, 85-year-old women today can only expect to have another two and a half years of active life. This means that although they are likely to continue living for longer than men of the same age, they spend less of that time in good health.

Quality, not just quantity

“Older women can no longer expect to live more active years than older men, despite their longer lives,” says Freedman.

This trend may partly stem from changes in lifestyle and medicine. Improved management of blood pressure and other risk factors means that heart attacks and other cardiovascular disorders are not the killers of men they once were.

Meanwhile, women's tendency to smoke started catching up with that of men in the 1960s, and those women are now in later life. Women are also more prone to ageing-associated conditions such as arthritis, depression, brittle bones and dementia. [Similar trends](#) seem to be occurring in [Europe](#) and [Japan](#).

Freedman's team is calling for more of a focus on adding quality, not just quantity, to our final years, especially with the number of [aged baby boomers](#) – and the bills for looking after them – set to soar.
