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Why do women live longer than men?

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In countries all over the world, the average life expectancy of women is years longer than it is for men. This trend is so significant that experts have identified many influencing factors. How many of these factors do you have the power to change?

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Do women live longer than men?

Wherever you are in the world, you've likely heard that women tend to outlive men. If you've ever wondered if this is true, you need only look around your local elderly nursing home – which in all probability will have a great deal more female occupants than male.

In the UK and worldwide, statistics confirm this gender longevity gap:

UK average age of death for men¹

- 2017–2019: 79.8 years of age.
- 2020: 78.6 years of age (slight decline influenced by the **COVID-19 pandemic**).

UK average age of death for women

- 2017–2019: 83.4 years of age.
- 2020: 82.6 years of age (slight decline influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic).

This suggests that on average, women can expect to live almost four years longer than men. This isn't a recent or a localised trend – since the mid 19th century and across the globe, the average woman has enjoyed a longer life expectancy compared to the average man. Over time, this longevity gap has increased².

Why do many men not live as long?

Before we explore the factors behind these statistics, let's not forget that we are speaking in averages. A person's lifespan is influenced by so many complex and intertwined factors – we know many men live beyond 80 years of age, just as we know many women and men never reach old age.

So why do women live longer than men in the overall population? Generally speaking, we know that there are common biological, cultural, and behavioural differences between men and women which can influence the life expectancy gap.

While it's hard to measure how strong each contribution is in a person's life, it may help to learn some of the key and unique challenges in men's overall health.

Chromosomes, hormones, and heart health

If you're born male, this risk factor is with you from birth. Biology can in part explain why more men than women develop **cardiovascular diseases** (this includes **heart disease**, a type of cardiovascular disease describing a set of conditions affecting the heart muscle and surrounding blood vessels).

Higher levels of oestrogen (the female sex hormone) and the presence of a second 'X' chromosome in women mean that women have more fat sitting under their skin (subcutaneous fat) whereas men carry more around their organs (visceral fat). This visceral fat is a risk factor for heart disease³.

Another biologically determined factor is size. Men tend to be larger in size than women. Scientists can see that within many species, larger animals tend to die earlier. However, how important this factor is in humans is unclear.

Mental health and coping mechanisms

Suicide

Even though **depression** isn't thought to affect more men than women, statistics from charities such as Samaritans in the UK continue to show that more men commit **suicide**⁴. Their latest data show that:

- The male suicide rate is 15.3 per 100,000 people.
- This is compared to the female suicide rate of 4.9 per 100,000 people.
- Males aged 45–49 years continue to have the highest suicide rate (23.8 per 100,000 people).

It's difficult to determine all the factors at play here, but many psychologists believe that harmful cultural expectations – for example, the taboo many men feel when experiencing **mental illness** – discourages them from seeking the help they need.

Patient picks for Ageing



Senior health

The secrets of living to 100 years old

There are some folk out there who prove that age doesn't have to be a barrier to anything. My great aunt, Mabel Iles, was most indignant that her employer (the local GP) took her bicycle away from her after she had a fall, so she couldn't get to work and had to retire. Sh...

by Dr Sarah Jarvis MBE, FRCGP



Senior health

Ageing feet

As feet get older they lose some of their strength and springiness due to changes in the skin and joints. Feet tend to spread and lose the fatty pads that cushion them. This does not mean that feet should necessarily become painful as they get older. However, it does mea...

by Dr Philippa Vincent, MRCGP

Stress-related illness

Of course, all men and women have the capacity to feel **stress**. When we're stressed, our bodies release adrenaline. Known as the "fight or flight" hormone, adrenaline speeds up your heart rate and raises your blood pressure.

Once your stress subsides, your blood pressure should return to normal. However, feeling persistently stressed can lead to long-term **high blood pressure**. This can increase the risk of several serious conditions, including heart disease and **stroke**. Stress can also encourage unhealthy habits – such as drinking **too much alcohol** and **smoking** – which can also pose a greater risk of health problems⁵.

Research suggests that women are more likely to develop healthier coping mechanisms compared with men. For example, men are less likely to seek mental health support services or to try stress-relieving techniques, such as **yoga**.

Penny Weston encourages men to attend her yoga classes at her Staffordshire-based Made Wellness Centre⁶. "Men are experiencing stress, anxiety, and burnout just the same as women," she says. "Yoga can really help clear and calm your mind, help fight negativity, and improve your mood."

Risky behaviour

It may seem like a stereotype, but statistics show that men – particularly young men – are far more likely to partake in risky behaviour that sometimes results in serious illness and death. This can range from unhealthy lifestyle choices like excessive smoking and drinking⁷, to road traffic accidents due to dangerous driving. In fact, young men make up 73% of all road traffic deaths⁸.

However, identifying whether this behaviour is influenced by culture, biology, or both is not as clear-cut. Some experts believe that many actions can be explained by **toxic masculinity** (or traditional masculinity) – the pressure many men feel to conform to dangerous masculine stereotypes such as risk-taking. Yet, others emphasise that the part of the brain that controls judgement and considers consequences develops at a slower rate in boys and young men compared to their female counterparts⁷.

Avoiding the doctors

Sadly, this is one prevalent yet avoidable reason why many women live longer than men. Again, toxic masculinity may play a key role here. One study⁹ found that men who followed the most traditional notions of masculinity – including being self-reliant and brave – were half as likely as men with more moderate masculinity beliefs to seek and receive healthcare.

Contacts you may find helpful (UK-based)

- **Samaritans** – mental health support and suicide prevention charity:
 - Call: 116 123 for free.
 - Email: jo@samaritans.org.
 - **Self-help app**.
- **Mind** – mental health support and resources charity:
 - Call: Infoline: 0300 123 3393 or legal line: 0300 466 6463.
 - Email: info@mind.org.uk or legal@mind.org.uk.
- **Andy's Man Club** – men's mental health charity offering free-to-attend talking groups:
 - Email: info@andysmanclub.co.uk.

Further reading

1. The King's Fund "What is happening to life expectancy in England?"
2. Our World in Data "Why do women live longer than men?"
3. Chiba, Saitoh, Takagi, Ohnishi, Katoh, Ohata, Nakagaw, and Shimamoto "Relationship between Visceral Fat and Cardiovascular Disease Risk Factors: The Tanno and Sobetsu Study".
4. Samaritans "Latest suicide data".
5. British Heart Foundation "Stress".
6. Penny Weston, Made Wellness Centre.

7. Weidner "Why do men get more heart disease than women? An international perspective".
8. World Health Organization (WHO) "Road traffic injuries".
9. Springer, Mouzon "Macho men and preventive health care: implications for older men in different social classes".

Article history

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