

Americans healthier, smarter in old age

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Our future may be grayer, but it doesn't have to be gloomier.

By 2020, 26 percent of Arizona's population will be over the age of 60, compared with 17 percent in 2003, census figures show. The over-85 age group is one of the fastest growing populations, and there are already more than 700 centenarians in the state.

"We've gained 30 years of life in the 20th century, which is unheard of," says Dr. Robert Butler, a gerontologist, psychiatrist and president of the International Longevity Center-USA. "That's more than in the preceding 5,000 years. It's an extraordinary increase."

All those extra years are thanks to better nutrition and medical care, especially improved cancer screening and treatment and the use of medicines such as cholesterol-lowering statins and antibiotics.

The good news is that the upcoming boom of older people is likely to be healthier and better educated than any group of seniors that's come before it. Rates of disability in the over-65 category have declined steadily since 1982, according to the National Academy of Sciences, and more older people, especially those over 70, are in the work force.

Physician S. Mitchell Harman, founder and director of Kronos Longevity Research Institute in Phoenix, said doctors in his group are seeing people in their 50s, 60s and 70s who are much healthier and more active than previous generations.

"Some of that is due to better nutrition, going to the gym and getting regular exercise, and some may be due to better conditions when they were growing up and maturing," he said. "The question is how do we sustain that and are there ways to improve that still further?"

Two new reports paint an optimistic picture. The AARP Public Policy Institute released figures in October that said the number of people living in nursing homes has remained constant since about 1985, but as a proportion of the population, it has declined. In September, the International Longevity Center-USA attacked the "Myths of the High Medical Cost of Old Age and Dying." While medical costs have soared, the report found, the increase in the aging population explains only 6 to 7 percent of that increase. Instead of demographics, the factors responsible are costly technology, workforce shortages and other economic factors.

"It flies against the contemporary notion that we're somehow going to hell in a handbasket because of the growing numbers of old people," says Butler.

At the same time, he urges caution.

"Baby boomers have not saved enough money, and unfortunately our country has become overweight. Plus there are 47 million people who don't have health insurance."

In fact, although Americans' life expectancy - about 78 years - has been inching upward, we've fallen from 11th to 42nd place in the world over the last 20 years, according to census figures.

"We're behind Jordan and Singapore," Butler says.

Kronos' Harman said the increases in longevity over the last three centuries are still occurring, but he added that there are threats. For example, there's an epidemic of obesity and increasing rates of type 2 diabetes. In 1997, 16.4 percent of people over the age of 65 who were on Medicare were obese. In 2002, that had increased to 21.4 percent.

Additionally, we may not be living as well in the next 20 years as we are now if we have problems with agriculture or clean water, Harman said. "These are issues that could degrade the human experience."

Another factor contributing to a possible decrease in longevity is a lack of access to health insurance, especially among African-Americans, who already have lower life expectancy rates.

The way health care is delivered also may affect how long we live. While the U.S. ranks high in preventive care and treating diseases, the medical community doesn't do as well in treating people with chronic illnesses. That doesn't bode well for older people, who often take many kinds of medicines for different conditions.

Geriatricians are physicians who specialize in treating older people. The number of doctors entering geriatric medicine fellowship programs decreased from 167 in 2003 to 91 in 2007, according to the American Geriatrics Society. One reason is that geriatric doctors earn significantly less and have less predictable work schedules than those in specialties such as dermatology, plastic surgery and emergency medicine.

Dr. Walter Nieri, director of Sun Health Research Institute Center for Healthy Aging, said that proper nutrition, daily activity and engaging the mind with new experiences will help people live to 100.

But what may often be forgotten is an individual's outlook.

"People should maintain a positive attitude," he said.

This means focusing on the joys and successes of their present life, not what once was.

"Maybe they can't run a marathon anymore, but they can still exercise, and they should focus on that."

Butler believes other countries have prepared for this demographic shift better than the United States. But just the existence of all these older people may be a boon in itself.

"In the 1960s, everyone was excited about the youth market and now we have the growing old-age markets, which the Japanese delicately call the 'silver industries.' Those would be financial services, housing, travel, health care. All of those industries are very highly tied to the idea of remaining alive longer, and the idea of saving for the future.

"You don't save for the future unless you think you have one."