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LONGEVITY

Life span forecasts often exaggerated

People born this century will live, on average, to 85



Photo Illustration / MSNBC

By Charlene Laino
MSNBC

SAN FRANCISCO, Feb. 18 — We've all been grabbed by the headlines that scream out: "Potential fountain of youth," followed by stories about fruit flies and tiny worms that, with a bit of gene modifications here or there, doubled, even tripled their life spans. But short of a miracle, don't expect science to conquer the aging process in humans any time in the near future, researchers said here Sunday.

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Charlene Laino
MSNBC HEALTH EDITOR

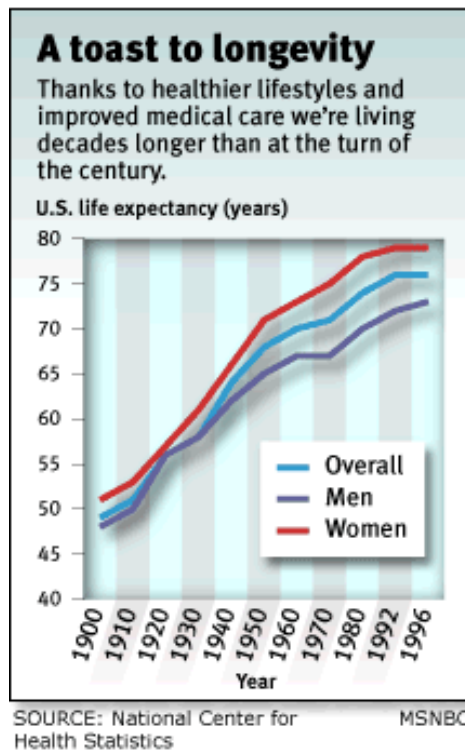
REPORTS that average life expectancy will be extended to at least 100 during this century are greatly exaggerated, researchers said. Rather, people born this century will live an average of 85 years, they said.

“Everyone alive today will be long dead before a life expectancy of 100 is achieved,” said Jay Olshansky, a public health professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. “There are no magical potions, hormones, antioxidants, forms of genetic engineering or biomedical technologies that exist today that would permit a life expectancy of 120 or 150 years as some people have claimed.”

Claims by some scientists that humans are capable of living well past 100 years are “outrageous,” agreed Leonard Hayflick, an aging expert at the University of California, San Francisco. “Superlongevity,” he said “is simply not a possibility.”

But not all the news is discouraging. Better medical care has caused average life expectancy to increase by 30 years since 1900, Olshansky said during a panel discussion on the topic at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

An American girl born in 1900, for example, had a life expectancy of 48.9 years, compared with 79 for one born in 1995.



But it will be at least 200 years before an average baby born in France or Japan can expect to live 100 years, and 600 years before the average American baby can expect to join the centurion club, Olshansky said he will report next week in the journal *Science*.

The reason for the disparity, he said, is differences in how quickly death rates are declining in the three countries. Death rates from 1985 to 1995 declined by 1.5 percent in France, 1.2 percent

in Japan and 0.4 percent in the U.S., Olshansky said.

Projecting forward, life expectancy would be 85 years in France and Japan by 2033 and 2035, respectively. Americans would reach a life expectancy of 85 in 2182, Olshansky said.

Also, the projections could easily change. "If antibiotic resistance produces a higher death rates in some groups, for example, average life expectancy could begin to fall," he said.

OLDEST HUMAN TO DATE

To date, Jeanne Calment, a Frenchwoman, holds the prize for the longest life span, dying in 1997 at the age of 122.45 years.

But life span does not correspond to life expectancy, Hayflick said. Life span is how long one lives, while life expectancy is a measure of how long half of the population born in a given year can expect to live.

The maximum human life span is about 125 years, he said, and has been for 100,000 years.

Even if the most common causes of death - cancer, heart disease and stroke - were eliminated, life expectancy would increase by no more than 15 years, he said. After that, he said, people would still die of old age.



While many researchers claim they are studying the aging process, what they are really investigating are age-associated diseases such as Alzheimer's, he said. The decline of cells on the molecular level is what truly characterizes the aging process and that has not received much attention.

HEALTH What's your real age?

But Kaare Christensen of the University of Denmark said the situation is not as bleak in his part of the world. "The population of centenarians is doubling every 10 years" in Scandinavia, he said.

In Sweden, where every citizen's birth and death is listed on a national registry, the oldest person to die in 1999 was 108.

THINK HEALTH SPAN

"Is there any evidence that we are reaching a limit?" he asked. "I don't think so. We are not pushing up against the limit of the human life span."

Healthy discussion

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Perhaps the best way to approach the topic is to look at health span, rather than life span, Olshansky said. A 65-year-old today is as healthy as a 60-year-

old was in 1960, he said.

Dr. Michael Roizen, one of the creators of an innovative program known as RealAge designed to help you live a longer, younger life, agrees.

"If you choose to eat dinner in a restaurant that allows smoking, for example, what does that do to your longevity compared with dining in a nonsmoking environment?" he asks. "The point is to make rational choices.

"Quality of years lived is perhaps more important than number of years lived."