

LIFE EXPECTANCY

For thousands of years, the most common causes of death were infections. Not just the terrifying childhood infections like diphtheria and measles, but also infections that could strike anyone of any age, like infectious diarrhea, pneumonia, and tuberculosis. Living past 60 was quite a feat, and living past 80 or 90 was legendary. To most, living past 100 was a dream similar to walking on the moon.

That was true until a little over a hundred years ago, when things suddenly started to change. Sanitation made some infections less common, and the realization that drinking from certain contaminated wells might make you sick changed all of the theories about the spread of infections forever. Over the past 60 years, the combination of antibiotics and immunizations has changed our perception of infections from something that our grandparents lived in fear of to something that we just assume can be either prevented or cured.

Infections are no longer the most common causes of death, and life expectancy rates have gone up and up. People are living longer, and with that change have come new ailments that our grandparents and great grandparents never even dreamed of when they were children – diseases that are directly related to excesses in our diets, including heart disease, high blood pressure, type II diabetes, and even some forms of cancer.

Sure, these diseases existed hundreds of years ago, but they were as rare then as measles is now. The bottom line is that people are getting bigger and bigger (which also means fatter and fatter). As a pediatrician, I see that every day, and it really worries me. Growth charts, which show you where a child's height and weight are compared to all of the other kids of the same age, have changed dramatically over the past 25 years – a weight that might have been at the 50th percentile in 1980 is probably at the 10th percentile now, as kids have gotten heavier and heavier.

Parents often worry about what their children are eating. I do as well, but it's not the hormones, the antibiotics, the mercury, or the pesticides that really worry me. It is the food itself! All around the world, we can point to examples of places where the traditional diets allow people to live a long time – Okinawa and Crete, for example, where fresh local produce and whole grains are the foundation of the diet, where the primary protein is fish, and where the primary fats are actually good for you (omega three fish oils and olive oils).

Unfortunately, we can also see quite clearly that even in these places where people are the most likely to live past 100, the likelihood of a person living that long is actually going down. Imagine that! All of the technology in the world, and in all of these places the thing that is keeping people from living as long is the fact that they are eating more processed foods and fewer things from their own medieval garden!

Edward M. Pickens, M.D.

If I had to pick one thing to change about the 21st century diet, it would be the simple sugars. Our bodies do not do a good job processing them, and they were never meant to. The vast majority of the kids that I see who are truly obese got that way from drinking sugar-containing drinks (soda, juice, sports drinks, sweet tea) and processed snack foods. I won't go into all of the complex social reasons for having that sort of diet, but it could be summed up by saying that it is cheaper, and it is certainly easier a lot of the time. If everyone exercised enough to burn off all of those calories, that would be one thing, but most of us don't.

By default, eliminating the sugar-containing drinks means more milk and water, and eliminating the snack foods means more fruits and vegetables. Start with the drinks. In a perfect world, that would not be the only thing that I would change, but most families can only stand so much change before they fall off the wagon all together. A few years ago, I eliminated sodas from my diet and replaced them with water – I did nothing else differently – and I lost 30 pounds.

Of course, it is not just what you eat but how much you eat. We have a sheer overabundance of food in our society, the likes of which our grandparents never thought that they would ever see. There is food everywhere! I am not going to try to change that, but I do think it is important that parents learn to say “no”, and also not to use food as a reward. If kids are used to eating less, they actually get the expectation for needing less, which can last a lifetime. Obesity is much easier to prevent than it is to reverse.

With the advent of antibiotics, life expectancy rates skyrocketed. With the arrival of immunizations, they went up even higher. As we have gotten better at preventing birth defects, preventing accidents, and treating common ailments, the rates have continued to creep upward, but we are now at the point where life expectancy has the potential to actually go down, not because of the shortcomings of modern medicine, but because of lifestyle. If we could solve the problem of what we are doing to ourselves with overeating and inadequate exercise, there is no telling how long we might be able to live. What would happen if we could actually prevent a heart disease, high blood pressure, strokes, diabetes, and even some cancers, or at least delay them for a few decades?

In this country, the estimated life expectancy is for a man is currently in the mid seventies, and for a woman, it is now right at 80. These estimates are for a population with a large percentage of people who eat way too much unhealthy food. Imagine how long our children could live if they have the advantages of both infection control and eating the right foods, right from the start! Is living to 80 good enough? Not for me. I want my kids to live to be 100, and I want them to feel good when they get there.