

PFG

Life Expectancy-Men and Women

WASHINGTON- Women, take care: After more than a century of living longer than men, your advantage is starting to shrink. Men are gaining on you.

That's the conclusion of scientists studying the question of why females generally outlive males in the United States and other advanced nations.

"Women live longer than men for reasons that are still not completely understood," said Richard Hodes, the director of the National Institute on Aging in Washington, D.C.

But that's certainly changing. A female born in 1975 could expect to live 7.8 years longer than a male. Now, the gender gap is down to 5.4 years, smaller than at any time since 1950.

The main reason is that women are "smoking more and dying earlier as a result," said Fred Pampel, a demographer at the University of Colorado in Boulder.

Until the 1960s, far more men than women smoked.

There also are other causes-biological, social and behavioral, experts say. Among them:

The X Files: Women have two X chromosomes in their DNA, while men have one X and one Y.

If one of a woman's X chromosomes is damaged by radiation or toxic chemicals, the other one can take its place.

Men have no such safety net and thus are more susceptible to certain diseases.

The Spare Tire: Men tend to collect fat around their bellies, increasing the danger of a heart attack.

Women put their extra pounds on their thighs, which distresses them, but doesn't kill them.

Hormones: The female hormone, estrogen, also may reduce the risk of heart disease in women, said Robert Hummer, the director of the Population Research Center at the University of Texas in Austin.

The male hormone, testosterone, drives boys and men to "higher rates of vigorous physical activity and physical aggressiveness, which contribute to

their higher rates of injury mortality," said Ingrid Waldron, a biologist at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.

Attitude: "The gender gap in mortality is probably due more to behavioral and social factors than to strictly biological factors," Hummer said. "Women tend to behave in more healthy ways than men," he said.

"Women tend to smoke less, drink less, use fewer dangerous drugs, use their seat belts more often, drive less recklessly and use less violence than men."

Statistics show that men are more likely than women to be employed in dangerous occupations, such as construction and mining, Waldron said.

Gun use is more common among males, leading to higher mortality from gun accidents, suicide and homicide.

"Men die more often from destroying themselves with cigarettes, drugs, alcohol, driving fast," Said Royda Crosem the author of a 1997 book titled "Why Women Live Longer Than Men."