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Outliving women?

BY LISA MELTON

Lifestyle changes mean that men now live longer

IN MOST countries women outlive men, but according to a French study published in June, the traditional gap in life expectancy is closing. Men are living longer than ever before, and are catching up with women. The key is men's changing behaviour: they are giving up drinking and smoking and are taking better care of their bodies.

Women live, on average, seven years longer than men. Why men have always died younger is still debated. The truth is likely to be a complex blend of biological, economic and social factors.

"Men tend to behave in ways that are harmful to health," explains Dr France Meslé, of the National Institute of Demographic Studies in Paris, and author of the study. "They tend to drink and smoke to excess, and to engage in violent or risk-taking behaviour such as driving dangerously."

To make matters worse, heart disease — the No 1 killer in industrialised countries — affects men more than women early in life. Anti-smoking campaigns, screening cholesterol and blood pressure in the population, preventive therapies such as statins and aspirin, and access to better medical treatment have all contributed to cutting deaths from cardiovascular disease in both sexes, says Meslé, but women traditionally take health-promotion messages seriously. For men, the need to be seen as "hard" may have prevented them from taking better care.

Are men now following women's example? Meslé comments: "There are some big changes in the traditional male attitude to health." Men have realised that typical male antics lead to premature death and that by adopting a healthier lifestyle they can look forward to a long life. This new awareness is boosting the rise in male longevity.

Among industrialised countries, the male-female gap is narrowest in Sweden, where women outlive men by four years on average. In England and Wales the disparity stands at five years (women's life expectancy is 80, men's 75); in the US, there is a five-and-a-half-year gap, in Italy six.

Lesley Doyal, Professor of Health and Social Care at the University of Bristol, says: "Women do have the biological potential to live longer." But it is not clear why.

Some believe that as they age, women maintain a more vigorous immune system, which allows them to fight off disease more efficiently than men. Women may also enjoy a natural genetic advantage because they have two X chromosomes, which provides two different sources for key genes.

But female superiority is in jeopardy. Women are adopting bad habits: they are smoking and drinking more and, as a result, the number of deaths from lung cancer and heart disease is rising.

If the trend continues, researchers predict, the life- expectancy gap may shrink even farther.

The author is a science writer at the Novartis Foundation

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