- Life expectancy

5 reasons why women live longer than men

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IF YOU'VE ever wondered why women tend to live longer than men, you're not alone. Globally, women outlive men by an average of five years (73.8 years for women versus 68.4 years for men in 2021). This trend has been consistent across all countries since 2006.

But what's behind this longevity gap? Science has some fascinating answers.

1. Women have a biological advantage from birth

The longevity gap begins at birth. Studies show that newborn boys have a higher probability of death than newborn girls, with boys being more likely to be born premature and suffering higher death rates in the first week of life. One reason for this is that boys tend to have weaker immune systems at birth, making them more vulnerable to infectious diseases. Additionally, because men have only one X chromosome (compared to women's two), they are more susceptible to genetic disorders. This early vulnerability sets the stage for a higher male mortality rate throughout life, contributing to the overall gap in life expectancy.

2. Men take more risks

Risk-taking behaviour is another significant factor. Men are more likely to engage in dangerous activities, including risky sports, hazardous jobs, and reckless driving. Men are also more likely to experience violent deaths, including those caused by accidents, homicides, and suicides. According to global statistics, male suicide rates are significantly higher than female rates, despite women being more likely to be diagnosed with depression or make non-fatal suicide attempts.

3. Women are more health-conscious

When it comes to health behaviours, women generally score higher. Women are more likely to visit doctors regularly for health screenings and preventive care. According to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, men are far more likely to skip routine health checks. Women smoke less, drink less and are less likely to abuse drugs than men, reducing their risk of chronic conditions like heart disease, liver damage, and certain cancers.

4. Hormones play a protective role Women's biological makeup also contributes to their longevity. Estrogen, the primary female hormone, has been shown to have protective effects on the cardiovascular system, helping lower the risk of heart disease, which is one of the leading causes of death globally. In contrast, men produce more testosterone, which has been linked to riskier behaviour and aggression. Testosterone may also contribute to higher rates of cardiovascular diseases in men.

5. Women tend to have stronger social connections

Social connections and emotional support play a critical role in longevity. Studies have shown that men are more likely to be socially isolated than women, especially as they age.

Why does this matter? Loneliness has been linked to higher mortality rates. People with strong social bonds are more likely to engage in healthy behaviours, recover faster from illnesses and experience lower stress levels.

Why do women report more illnesses than men?

Interestingly, while women live longer, they report more illnesses than men.

This phenomenon is known as the “morbidity-mortality paradox”. Women are more likely to experience chronic but non-fatal conditions, such as arthritis or migraines, which can affect quality of life but not necessarily shorten it. Men, on the other hand, face higher rates of life-threatening illnesses like heart disease and are less likely to seek treatment, often leading to earlier deaths.