

Are women's birth months, life spans linked?

By CAROLYN SUSMAN

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WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. - There is hardly a more compelling subject than human longevity: What affects our lifespan and how can we lengthen and improve our time here?

Many scientists are tackling these issues, among them Dr. Leonid Gavrilov of the Center on Aging, University of Chicago.

Gavrilov and his wife have published several papers on this topic, and they delivered one in May at the Population Association of America's annual meeting. They have received grants from the National Institute on Aging, but they are struggling to get more money to continue their research, Gavrilov said.

As part of their studies, the Gavrilovs looked at nearly 5,000 records of women from European aristocracy.

Surprisingly, he said, they found that the month of a woman's birth was an important predictor for life expectancy.

Linking birth month, or conditions at birth, to life expectancy or illness later in life isn't the sole province of the Gavrilovs.

Dr. Dolores Malaspina linked older fathers — 45 and up — with an increased risk of schizophrenia in their children in research presented in 2001, for example.

And Gavrilov points out in his paper that February and August, the months singled out as the worst for women to be born, are already known in scientific literature as "bad" months, linked to cystic fibrosis, and also to schizophrenia.

There is no definitive reason why. But it is supposed that seasonal variations in longevity and disease may be linked to the lack of availability of certain critical vitamins, such as folic acid and B12, during late winter and early spring.

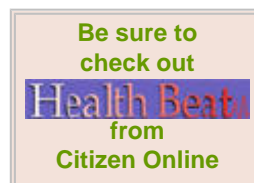
Even today, the March of Dimes and other organizations concerned with healthy babies have run ad campaigns urging young women of child-bearing age to make sure they consume enough folic acid.

(You can get it in pill form, but it's also found in brussels sprouts, asparagus, spinach and orange juice.)

Such vitamin deficiencies, Gavrilov writes, appear to mimic radiation in damaging the body's DNA structure.

The Gavrilovs also explored other conditions that may impact life span, including the age of the father at conception, family size, and parental longevity.

But they were particularly stunned by the month of conception appearing to influence life span of women.



Time of conception didn't impact men, oddly enough, and they are adamant that further research needs to explore why and to recognize the need for separate inquiries for both men and women when these types of studies are conducted.

"We are extremely anxious about pollution, and nuclear power," Gavrilov said, "and at the same time, we are extremely negligent about vitamin consumption."

He would love to continue this research, but he says it is often confused with astrology and "that makes it difficult to get funding."

Maybe so. But the need for adequate vitamin intake is well-established, and Gavrilov's research apparently verifies this.

On Health is a weekly column on health issues. If you have questions or comments, write Carolyn Susman at The Palm Beach Post, P.O. Box 24700, West Palm Beach, Fla. 33416, call 820-4433 or e-mail carolyn—susman@pbpost.com