

How to live long and prosper

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WANT to be the first one on your block to live to 100? You are in with a fighting chance if you're the first-born child of a young mother.

Natalia Gavrilova and Leonid Gavrilov of the University of Chicago sifted through data gathered on 991 centenarians born in the US between 1875 and 1899 and used US census and Social Security Administration records to reconstruct the family histories of 198 of them, searching for anything they had in common.

It turned out that first-born children were 1.7 times as likely as their siblings to live to be 100. An even stronger predictor of longevity was how young their mother was when they were born. Those whose mothers were less than 25 years old were twice as likely to survive beyond a century.

While the researchers aren't certain why this should be, they suspect younger mothers are less likely to have acquired latent infections during their life that could damage the health of the fetus. Younger mothers may also have better-quality eggs. "If the best, most vigorous maternal ova cells are used first - very early in life - this could explain why particularly young mothers produce particularly long-lived children," Gavrilov says.

The results were presented at a meeting of the Gerontological Society of America in Dallas, Texas, this week.

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