

Education and Longevity

Research census data demonstrates that people who live longer have more education, and this is true around the world. There are differences among subgroups (rich and poor, different ethnic groups) demonstrating that longevity is not evenly distributed within nation states. Overall though, education is one common factor associated with a longer life. Extra years in school translates into a longer, healthier life. A recent study in the US shows that going to school for one more year translated into an additional year and a half in terms of life expectancy for someone age 35 years.

A key example is smoking rates. Reports from the Centers for Disease Control show that 11.3% of people with at least 16 years of education smoke, while 36.8 percent of those with nine to 11 years of education are smokers.

What isn't clear from the research is why more education extends life expectancy. One argument is that more educated people are better at planning for the future. This may translate into making better connections between what one does now (like smoking) and the long-term effects (the incredibly high probability of cancer if one does smoke). Genetics play a relatively small role in determining life span, and life choices related to common diseases that shorten life span play a much more significant role.

But, of course, other factors contribute to decreased life expectancy—a key factor is social isolation. People who are connected to others (family or friends, peers or inter-generational) live longer lives. And, higher income (which can be associated with higher education levels) is associated with a longer life.

It is not a guarantee nor is the connection perfectly clear, but if you want a long life, staying in school might help!

Sandra Mathison, PhD
Professor of Education, UBC and McBride parent
sandra.mathison@ubc.ca