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First born more likely to hit 100

Environmental factors, genetics are key in reaching the century mark

By **HENRY FOUNTAIN**
New York Times

Centenarians are different from the rest of us: They are a select group, having persisted through wars, diseases and accidents that kill millions of ordinary mortals every year.

In looking at what makes a 100-year-old so special, those who study aging cite factors like genetics and environmental influences like good nutrition and health habits.

But a statistical study of centenarians by researchers at the University of Chicago has found some other potential predictors of extreme longevity:

- Women and men who were the first born in large families were two to three times more likely to make it to 100 than later-born children.
- Those raised in the rural West had a better chance of reaching that age.
- People who were born in October and November had longer life expectancy than those born in April through June.

"In the case of birth order, we were really surprised," said Leonid A. Gavrilov of the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, who sifted 75 million computerized genealogical records to identify centenarians born from 1875 to 1899.

What may improve the chances of first-borns reaching 100 is that in general they are born of relatively young parents. Sperm and eggs can become damaged over time, so children of older parents may have more health problems related to genetics.

Similarly, birth month, which has correlated to life expectancy in other studies, may be an indication of seasonal vitamin deficiencies or illnesses that affect childhood health, with an impact later in life.

Those health problems were more serious a century ago, when current centenarians were born, than now, when foods are fortified, fresh vegetables are available year round and vaccines are commonplace.

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- **Soaring numbers:** Demographers expect the number of centenarians to soar from the 50,000 counted in the 2000 census to 800,000 by midcentury.

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