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Key to long life may be mom's age at birth

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NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - People are more likely to see their 100th birthday, research hints, if they were born to young mothers.

The age at which a mother gives birth has a major impact on how long her child will live, two researchers from the University of Chicago's Center on Aging told the Chicago Actuarial Association meeting this spring.

The chances of living to the ripe old age of 100 -- and beyond -- nearly double for a child born to a woman before her 25th birthday, Drs. Leonid Gavrilov and Natalia Gavrilova reported. The father's age is less important to longevity, according to their research.

In a previous study, the husband and wife research team of Gavrilov and Gavrilova identified birth order as a possible predictor of an exceptionally long life. They observed that first-born children, especially daughters, are much more likely to live to age 100.

But their latest research suggests that it is the young age of the mother, rather than birth order, which is significant to longevity.

Using U.S. Census data, the Social Security Administration database, and genealogical records, Gavrilov and Gavrilova identified 198 centenarians born in the U.S. from 1890 to 1893. They reconstructed the family histories of these individuals to try to identify possible predictors of longevity.

They found that while being born to a young mother was an important predictor of reaching 100, other factors seem to help someone live an exceptionally long life. These include growing up in the Western part of the U.S., spending part of one's childhood on a farm, and being born first.

"Centenarians represent the fastest growing age group in industrialized countries, yet factors predicting exceptional longevity and its time trends remain to be fully understood," Gavrilov and Gavrilova note.

The finding that children born to young women are more likely to live to 100 "may have important social implications," Gavrilov added in a statement, "because many women postpone their childbearing to later ages because of career demands."

"This research helps us better understand the predictors of longevity and quantify the implications on society and business," said Thomas Edwards, a fellow of the Society of Actuaries, which co-sponsored the study.

The researchers emphasize that why children born to younger mothers have an advantage when it comes to longevity requires further study.

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