

The declining health of baby boomers

written by Dr. Ronald Hoffman | September 28, 2023



*"People try to put us d-down (talkin' 'bout my generation)
Just because we g-g-get around (talkin' 'bout my generation)
Things they do look awful c-c-cold (talkin' 'bout my generation)
Yeah, I hope I die before I get old (talkin' 'bout my generation)"—The Who, 1965*

"Baby boomers": The name given to the 76 million people born from 1946 to 1964. Boomers are now in their 50s, 60s and 70s.

We bore witness to the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Robert F. Kennedy. The specter of nuclear annihilation haunted our childhoods. We were engulfed by campus protests over the Vietnam War. Recreational drug use went mainstream and we grew our hair long to emulate hippies. The British Invasion, Blues, R&B, Acid Rock and Soul lent us our anthems. The Sexual Revolution was ushered in with the Pill and increasingly risqué media initiated us.

New threats to our health emerged as well. Our moms were told breastfeeding was primitive and were urged instead to nurse us with synthetic formulas. We were the first generation to be raised on antibiotics. We were also the first to sit mesmerized in front of TVs. Hostess Twinkies appeared in our lunch boxes, and frozen TV dinners became de rigueur whenever *Star Trek* and *The Outer Limits* were on. Drive-ins were introduced and fast food proliferated. Plastics became ubiquitous and millions of tons of novel industrial chemicals were poured into the environment. We became more sedentary, prompting JFK to launch a "President's Council on Physical Fitness" in the 1960s, wherein he urged Americans to take the 50-mile hikes previously required only of U.S. Marine officers.

I am a prototypical baby boomer, born in 1952, which will make me 71 this year.

26 years ago, in 1997, I published a book, originally titled "The Baby Boomers' Repair Manual". The dedication read: "To the Class of '69". The marketing geniuses at Simon & Schuster decided that the target audience was too narrow (really??) and changed the title to the blander "Intelligent Medicine". (Though they kept the ponderous subtitle: "A Guide to Optimizing

Health and Preventing Illness for the Baby-Boomer Generation".)

In retrospect, I don't mind, because it gave me the impetus to rebrand my radio show from *Health Talk* to *Intelligent Medicine*. Hence that became my new moniker for all my content, which suits me better.

The intent of the book was to provide guidelines for healthy aging for my generational peers. Already, at precisely the midlife age of 45, I could see trouble brewing for my compatriots.

Steven Haas, associate professor of sociology and demography at Penn State, has forecasted that the health of boomers may be worse than that of their predecessors in a number of ways:

"For example, when comparing baby boomers to those born during the later years of the Great Depression (between 1931 and 1941) at similar ages, baby boomers exhibited a greater number of chronic health conditions. Baby boomers also reported two or more chronic health conditions at younger ages."

The new term "Multimorbidity" has been invented to characterize boomers' woes. According to a prescient 2005 review in *The American Journal of Public Health*:

"When the members of the silent generation were aged 35–44 years, 14%–18% were obese. At comparable ages, 28%–32% of the youngest baby boomers were obese . . . Our results showed that members of the baby boom generation were more obese, and became so at younger ages than their predecessors . . . Trends in problems associated with sedentary behavior and obesity are worrisome, especially among baby boomers. Access to better nutrition has improved, but at the same time consumption of high-fat, high-carbohydrate foods has increased. In recent years, rates of obesity have risen dramatically, although physical activity rates have remained unchanged . . . Recent projections show that the aging of baby boomers will result in a doubling of the numbers of persons aged 65 years or older with arthritis or chronic joint symptoms by 2030, when the last of the baby boom generation will turn 65 years old."

I think back to my high school experience. What a disparity there was among teenagers of the same age! As a late bloomer, I was skinny and childish, barely able to run a razor over my peach fuzz. By contrast, the jocks were muscled and bearded. Girls, too, ran the gamut from prepubescent to voluptuous.

Everybody more or less caught up in young adulthood and middle age, but now the disparities are re-emerging. I attended my 50th high school reunion of the Class of '69, where most were turning the corner into their 8th decade. Sorrowfully, we recounted how many of us had passed on; conversations turned to heart attacks, knee, hip, and shoulder replacements, and the myriad meds that people had to take; many graduates looked older than their age and were virtually unrecognizable.

The contrast in external appearances of individuals the same age was as stark

as it was in high school—aging spurts as abrupt as puberty!

On the other hand, other classmates were competitive pickleball players, avid cyclists, hikers, even surfers. One of my fit classmates said he hadn't missed a day of running in the last 50 years since he went out for varsity cross-country. I learned my high school girlfriend had recently completed a cross-USA bike ride. Many looked youthful and vital, and were still working at demanding jobs.

Despite these outliers—and I can assure you my immigrant grandfather, who lived to be 101 despite eschewing all forms of sports, would've scoffed at my over-the-top triathlon training as *"mashugana"* – the overall trends are *not* encouraging.

The UK Vitality Clinic writes that, while medical advances are enabling baby boomers to live longer than previous generations, they're less healthy:

"13% of baby boomers rate their health as excellent, compared with 32% in the previous generation. 7% of boomers use a stick or similar device to help them walk, compared with only 3% of their parents. 13% have some limitation in their ability to perform daily activities, compared with 8.8% before. 75% of baby boomers are hypertensive, against only 35% of their elders."

And a new study suggests baby boomers may not be as mentally sharp as their parents were:

"Looking at two decades' worth of data on U.S. adults, the study found generational differences in tests of cognitive function. That refers to essential mental abilities such as remembering, reasoning and problem-solving. On average, Americans born in the early- to mid-boomer generation—between 1948 and 1959—fared a bit worse on those tests than previous generations. The pattern reversed what had been an improving outlook: Americans born between 1942 and 1947 had generally outperformed those born between 1890 and 1923."

No wonder: It's now been substantiated that lifestyle factors—e.g., diet, exercise, social connection—have a crucial impact on cognitive performance.

As to my 1997 book *"Intelligent Medicine"*, I think it has stood the test of time. A quarter century later, my recommendation to follow a low glycemic index *"Salad and Salmon Diet"* in which I urge avoiding refined carbohydrates and *"eating as if the flour mill had never been invented"*, with abundant polyphenol-rich vegetables, fruits, nuts, and spices, and natural unprocessed meats, fish, poultry, and eggs has been borne out by extensive research. By

contrast, the American Heart Association and the National Cholesterol Education Program remain mired in obsolete low-fat/low-cholesterol dietary orthodoxy.

I pointed out the health hazards of environmental pollutants, only to be vindicated by studies that now highlight their role in disease causation.

I urged attention to nutritional supplementation, and their increasing validation, acceptance, and popularization has buttressed that once-controversial position.

All in all, the book has aged well. If only my generation had fared comparably.

Because, contrary to *The Who* song lyrics, most of my generation have now conceded that we no longer hope to die before we get old. And that's where it can get challenging without the right preventive focus.