

Study: Ninety years of change in life expectancy, 1921 to 2011

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In 2011, Canadians lived an average of 81.7 years, an increase of almost 25 years since 1921.

Dividing the study timeframe into 30-year periods shows that the gains in life expectancy are slowing down. Life expectancy at birth rose more rapidly between 1921 and 1951 (+11.3 years) than between 1951 and 1981 (+7.1 years), or between 1981 and 2011 (+6.2 years).

Most of the increases in life expectancy in the past 90 years came from declines in what is frequently called premature death—death among individuals who are younger than age 75. These increases changed over time and amounted to 11.2 years in the first period (1921 to 1951), 6.0 years in the second period (1951 to 1981) and 4.7 years in the third (1981 to 2011).

One of the main drivers of the gain were improvements in child and infant (ages 0 to 4) mortality between 1921 and 1951, which added 6.7 out of the total 11.3 year increase in the period. Since 1951, in turn, reduced deaths from circulatory diseases account for most gains in life expectancy (2.8 out of 7.1 years gained between 1951 and 1981 and 4.0 out of 6.2 years gained between 1981 and 2011).

Canadians are living longer but, for many adults, the ability to perform key health functions declines as they age. After age 65, the decline in functional health tends to accelerate, with more severe disability (many activity limitations) occurring, on average, around age 77.

Note to readers

This release presents data from the [Vital Statistics – Death Database](#), which collects demographic and cause of death information annually from all provincial and territorial vital statistics registries on all deaths in Canada. Causes of death data in this database go back to 1926. To help with usage, data have been standardized as of 1974.

It also presents data from the [Canadian Mortality Database \(CMDDB\)](#), which is based on the Canadian Vital Statistics – Death Database. The CMDDB may contain death records and information updates made after the official publication of the vital statistics. Causes of death data in this database go back to 1950.

Definitions, data sources and methods: survey numbers 3226, 3233, 3901 and 5003.

The article "Ninety years of change in life expectancy (1921 to 2011)" in *Health at a Glance* (82-624-X), is now available from the *Browse by key resource* module of our website under *Publications*.

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