

# **PBS SPECIAL “STEALING TIME” STUDY: A SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

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## **Background and Methods**

In mid-April, AARP polled Americans aged 18 and older to ascertain their views on aging and the prospects for increased longevity and improved health and well-being for older persons in the next century. The survey enables us to compare peoples’ attitudes, beliefs, and expectations about aging and longevity with findings from the cutting-edge scientific research explored in the PBS special **Stealing Time: The New Science of Aging**. The special will air on June 2 and is funded in part by AARP and the AARP Andrus Foundation. A copy of the [annotated questionnaire](#) is attached.

The survey was conducted for AARP by [Market Facts, Inc.](#), of McLean, VA, as part of a TeleNation survey. A total of 2,032 adults aged 18 and older were interviewed by telephone April 9-14, 1999. TeleNation uses a random digit-dial sampling technique to select each sample from all available residential telephone numbers in the contiguous United States.

Where percentage differences between subgroups of the sample are cited in this summary, they are statistically significant at the 95 percent confidence level.

## **Key Findings**

### **Few Want to Live to 100**

Despite the fact that most adults anticipate that life will improve for older Americans and that there will be cures for life-threatening diseases (including cancer, AIDS, Alzheimer’s, and heart disease) during the next 50 years, only 27 percent say they would like to live to be 100 years old. Poor health and financial insecurity are the greatest worries people have about living to a very old age. The typical American would like to live to about 91, but expects to live only until 80.

### **Most Believe They Can Control How They Age and Are Doing Something to Stay Active and Healthy**

Nine in 10 adults believe that the way they age is at least partly within their control, and more than four in five (84%) report that they are now doing something to help them stay active and healthy as they grow older. The things they are most typically doing include exercise or other physical activity (70%), watching what they eat or drink or practicing good nutrition (33%), watching their weight (10%), or maintaining a positive or youthful attitude (10%).

## **Most Are Optimistic about the Well-being of Older Persons in the Future**

Three in five adults (60%) believe that life will be better for the average 80-year-old American during the next century, while only 18 percent think it will be worse, and 19 percent think it will be the same as it is now. More than half (56%) think that the average 80-year-old will be much healthier in the year 2050 than today, though still limited in what he or she can do compared with younger persons. More than one in five (21%), however, believe that 80-year-olds will be able to do and enjoy virtually everything in the year 2050 that 40-year-olds can do today.

## **Large Majorities Believe Major Killer Diseases Will Be Cured in the Next 50 Years**

When it comes to scientific advances in medicine during the next 50 years, the public is even more optimistic:

- 79 percent think there will be a cure for cancer
- 78 percent think there will be a cure for AIDS
- 72 percent think there will be a cure for Alzheimer’s disease, and
- 68 percent think there will be a cure for heart disease.

Fully 44 percent believe there will be a cure for all four of these diseases, while only five percent think there won’t be a cure for any of them. Optimism about these medical breakthroughs generally increases with age. More than half of Americans (57%) agree that medical advances within the next century will increase human life expectancy to 120 years.

## **Most Hold Positive Beliefs about Aging and Older Persons**

Sizable majorities believe that...

- Taking vitamins C and E help people stay mentally and physically active (71%)
- After age 80 it is still possible to increase physical strength by lifting weights (73%)
- Mental challenges (such as learning a new skill) can keep the brain healthy and active, even in old age (97%), and
- Older people are still capable of learning new things (96%).

## **Images of “Old” and “Young”: What Comes to Mind?**

The one thing that comes to mind, respondents said, when they think of a person as “old” is physical problems or physical or mental limitations (35%), appearance (19%), and attitude (18%).

What typically comes to mind when they think of a person as “young,” respondents said, is being active or energetic, or having an active or busy life (36%); a positive attitude (31%); or youthful appearance (12%).

### **How Old Is “Old”?**

At what age does the American public consider a person to be “old”? On average, across all age groups, a person is considered “old” at 69, though this varies by current age. Among those presently aged 18-24, a person is thought to be old at 58, while for someone currently 65 years old or older, 75 is considered old.

### **Living to a Very Old Age: What Americans Worry About**

Poor or declining health was mentioned by 40 percent of respondents as what they most worry about when they think of living to a very old age, and not having enough money to support themselves ranked second as respondents’ greatest worry (by 18%). When counting all the things people worry about—not just the concern they mention first—poor or declining physical health was cited by 46 percent and lack of money by 38 percent. Other commonly expressed worries were losing one’s mental faculties (13%), having to depend on others (12%), becoming a burden to one’s family (11%), being isolated or alone (9%), and living in a nursing home or “old age home” (8%).

### **Living to a Very Old Age: What Americans Look Forward to**

The public also perceives some positive features of living to a very old age, including more time to spend with family and friends (36%), not having to work after retirement (16%), having time for hobbies and other recreational activities (15%), and personal or spiritual growth (14%).

### **Few Know that 85-and-older Age Group is Growing the Fastest**

Relatively few Americans (28%) know that the 85-and-older age group is the fastest growing segment of the United States population. Knowledge of this trend is itself related to age: only 13 percent of 18-24-year-olds knew this fact, compared to 39 percent of persons 65 or older.

## **Attitudinal, Behavioral, and Demographic Differences: Highlights of Findings**

### **Living to 100**

Adults who want to live to be 100 or older...

- Think of a person as “old,” on average, at age 72, compared with 68 for those who do not want to live to be 100.
- Are less likely than those who don’t to mention self-care or dependency as a worry, or their first worry, about the prospect of living to a very old age.
- Have a more optimistic view of the well-being of older persons in the future than those who don’t want to live to be 100. For example, they are more likely to:
  - ➔ Agree that within the next century advances in medical research will increase human life expectancy to 120 years (67% vs. 54%);
  - ➔ Think that in the year 2050 80-year-olds will be able to do and enjoy what 40-year-olds do today (29% vs. 18%);
  - ➔ Think there will be cures for Alzheimer’s disease (78% vs. 70%) and heart disease (74% vs. 67%); and
  - ➔ Think there will be cures for all four diseases inquired about in the survey (52% vs. 42%).

### **Controlling the Aging Process**

Adults who think they have some control over how they age...

- Expect to live longer than those who don’t (on average, to age 80 vs. age 76).
- Are more likely than those who don’t to be doing something now that they think will help them stay active and healthy as they grow older (86% vs. 65%).
- Are more optimistic than those who don’t about the benefits of weight lifting for persons aged 80+ (74% vs. 58%), the role of mental challenges in keeping the brain healthy and active even in old age (98% vs. 86%), and the ability of older people to learn new things (97% vs. 93%).
- Are more likely to think that life will be better for the average 80-year-old in the year 2050 than it is today (61% vs. 49%).

- Are more likely than those who don't to rate their own health as excellent or good (84% vs. 74%).

### **Age of Respondent**

- Persons who are already 65 or older both *want* and *expect* to live longer, on average, than all other age groups.
- The age at which a person is considered “old” varies by current age. People who are 55 and older consider a person “old” at age 74, while young adults aged 18-24 consider a person “old” at age 58.
- Young adults are more likely than persons aged 45 and older to say that “old” has to do with appearance (such as wrinkles or gray hair), and persons aged 65+ are more likely than young adults to think of a person as being “young” in terms of attitudinal characteristics (such as enthusiasm or fun-loving) rather than physical attributes.
- People aged 55 and older are more likely than younger persons to say they are now doing something to help themselves stay active and healthy as they grow older.
- People aged 45 and older are more optimistic about medical breakthroughs and cures for diseases than younger persons, and they are more likely than young adults to agree that advances in medical research within the next century will increase human life expectancy to age 120.
- Those aged 65+ are less likely than younger persons to believe that by age 80 it is too late to increase physical strength by lifting weights.
- Adults aged 45-64 are more likely than persons under 45 to think life will be better for the average 80-year-old in the next century than it is now.
- Though only a minority of all adults (28%) know that the fastest growing age group in the United States is persons 85 and older, those aged 65 and over are more likely to know this than young adults (39% vs. 13%).

### **Staying Active and Healthy**

Those who report that they are now doing something to stay active and healthy as they get older...

- Are more likely to believe they have some control over how they age than those who are not (92% vs. 78%).

- Expect to live longer than those not presently doing anything (to an average age of 81 vs. age 76).
- Are less likely than those not now doing anything to say that their first worry about living to a very old age is self-care or dependency (31% vs. 39%).
- Are more optimistic than those who are not about the beneficial effects of weight lifting (74% vs. 67%) and mental challenges (97% vs. 93%), and about the efficacy of taking vitamins C and E (72% vs. 62%).
- Are more optimistic about the future than those who are not. They are more likely to think that life will be better for the average 80-year-old in the year 2050 than it is today (61% vs. 52%), and that by the year 2050 there will be cures for AIDS (79% vs. 72%) and Alzheimer's disease (73% vs. 66%).
- Are more likely than those not doing something to report themselves as being in excellent or good health (86% vs. 66%).

## **Education and Income**

- On average, college-educated adults want to live longer than persons with a high school education or less (to age 92 vs. 89, on average).
- College-educated adults also expect to live longer than persons with a high school education or less (to age 81 vs. 77, on average).
- Persons with at least some college education are more likely than those with a high school education or less to think they can do something to stay active and healthy as they grow older (93% vs. 85%).
- A higher percentage of persons with post-graduate education than those with a high school education or less are presently doing something to help themselves stay active and healthy as they age (90% vs. 81%).
- Worries about poor or declining health associated with living to a very old age are more common among higher-income adults (52% among those with annual household incomes of \$50K+) than they are among lower-income adults (41% among those with household incomes under \$15K). They are also more common among persons with at least some college education (52%) than among lesser-educated adults (40% of those with a high school education or less).
- People with annual household incomes of under \$15K are much more pessimistic about the quality of life for 80-year-olds in the next century than persons from higher income

households. For instance, they are less likely than persons of all other income groups to think that 80-year-olds will be much healthier in the year 2050 than they are today (38% vs. 55% on average for persons with higher household incomes), or that life will be better during the next century for the average 80-year-old than it is today (44% vs. 59% for higher-income persons).

## **Gender**

- Women, on average, expect to live longer than men (81 vs. 79).
- For women, a person is considered “old” at 71, while for men “old” is 67.
- Women are more likely than men to say they watch what they eat and drink (41% vs. 24%) and that they eat right (31% vs. 17%).

## ANNOTATED QUESTIONNAIRE

### PBS SPECIAL: "STEALING TIME" STUDY

(N=2,032)

(Percentages unless otherwise indicated)

1. If you had your choice, how long would you like to live? That is, until what age?

#\_\_\_\_\_ (VALID RANGE 50-150) Mean 91.2

2. If you had to guess, how long do you think you will live? That is, until what age?

#\_\_\_\_\_ (VALID RANGE 30-110) Mean 79.8

3a. Thinking about the prospect of living to a very old age, what one thing would you worry about most? **(DO NOT READ LIST. ENTER FIRST MENTION ONLY ON THIS SCREEN.)**

31	Poor, declining, failing health .....	1
18	Lack of money, not being able to support myself, outliving my savings .....	2
9	Losing my mental abilities, becoming senile, etc. ....	3
9	Dependence on others.....	4
5	Being a burden on my family.....	5
4	Living in a nursing home or "old age" or retirement home.....	6
4	Isolation, being alone, not having friends or family .....	7
1	Poor environment/pollution/etc.....	8
12	Other <b>(SPECIFY)</b> .....	9
5	Nothing.....	10
2	Don't know .....	X
-	Refused.....	R

→ **(SKIP TO QU. 4)**

**FOR QU. 3b, DON'T SHOW RESPONSE GIVEN IN QU. 3a.**

3b. **(PROBE:)** What other things would you worry about? **(PROBE:)** Anything else? **(DO NOT READ LIST. ENTER ALL OTHER MENTIONS ON THIS SCREEN.)**

17	Poor, declining, failing health .....	1
20	Lack of money, not being able to support myself, outliving my savings .....	2
5	Losing my mental abilities, becoming senile, etc. ....	3
6	Dependence on others.....	4
5	Being a burden on my family.....	5
5	Living in a nursing home or "old age" or retirement home.....	6
5	Isolation, being alone, not having friends or family .....	7
2	Poor environment/pollution/etc.....	8
9	Other <b>(SPECIFY)</b> .....	9
23	Nothing.....	10
2	Don't know .....	X
1	Refused.....	R

4. What one thing would you most look forward to? **(RECORD VERBATIM. PROBE FOR CLARIFICATION. DO NOT PROBE FOR ADDITIONAL RESPONSES.)**

36 friends and family	15 recreation	9 personal growth	3 nothing	1 refused
16 retirement	10 maintaining health	6 other	4 don't know	

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5. What one thing, more than any other, makes you think of a person as being "old"? **(RECORD VERBATIM. PROBE FOR CLARIFICATION. DO NOT PROBE FOR ADDITIONAL RESPONSES. IF RESPONDENT MENTIONS CHRONOLOGICAL AGE, PROBE FOR SOMETHING ELSE.)**

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35 physical/mental problems/limitations	19 appearance	18 attitude	8 incapable of self care
14 other	5 don't know	1 refused	

6. What one thing, more than any other, makes you think of a person as being “young”? **(RECORD VERBATIM. PROBE FOR CLARIFICATION. DO NOT PROBE FOR ADDITIONAL RESPONSES. IF RESPONDENT MENTIONS CHRONOLOGICAL AGE, PROBE FOR SOMETHING ELSE.)**

36 active/energetic/busy    31 positive attitude    12 appearance    8 negative characteristics

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4 mental alertness    5 other    4 don't know

7. In your opinion, at what age does a person become “old”? **(PROBE, IF NECESSARY, FOR AN EXACT AGE. IF RESPONDENT SAYS IT DEPENDS ON THE PERSON, OR SOMETHING ELSE, PROBE:)** At what age do you generally consider a person to be “old”?

# \_\_\_\_\_ **(VALID RANGE 30-110)**    Mean 69.2

8. Do you think there is anything you can do to stay active and healthy as you grow older, or do you think the way you age is basically outside your control? **(DO NOT READ LIST. ENTER SINGLE RESPONSE.)**

90 Yes, can do something ..... 1  
9 No, outside of my control..... 2  
1 Don't know ..... X  
- Refused ..... R

9. Are you now doing anything which you feel will help you stay active and healthy as you grow older?

84 Yes ..... 1  
16 No ..... 2 ]  
- Don't know ..... X ]  
- Refused ..... R ]

→ **(SKIP TO QU. 10)**

9a. And what would that be? (**PROBE:**) Anything else? (**RECORD VERBATIM. PROBE FOR CLARIFICATION.**)  
 (multiple responses were permitted)

64 physical activity    33 watching food/drink    10 mental attitude    10 watching weight    8 hobbies

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7 personal/family/relationships    5 learning/reading    5 good medical care    4 don't know

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10. Please tell me whether you AGREE or DISAGREE with each of the following statements.

Do you agree or disagree with the statement... (**INSERT AND RANDOMIZE STATEMENT**)?

<u><b>Agree</b></u>	<u><b>Disagree</b></u>	<u><b>Don't Know</b></u>	<u><b>Refused</b></u>
1	2	X	R

**(STATEMENTS:)**

- (1) Taking vitamin C and E helps people stay mentally and physically active.
- (2) After age 80 it is too late to increase physical strength by lifting weights.
- (3) Mental challenges, such as learning a new skill, can help keep the brain healthy and active, even at an old age.
- (4) It is almost impossible for older people to learn anything new.
- (5) Within the next century, advances in medical research will increase human life expectancy to 120 years.

	Agree	Disagree	Don't Know
(1)	71	19	10
(2)	23	73	4
(3)	97	3	1
(4)	3	96	-
(5)	57	40	3

11. Looking ahead well into the new century, to about 2050, what do you think life will be like for the average 80 year old American, compared to today, will it be... **(READ LIST. ENTER SINGLE RESPONSE.)**

- 60 Better ..... 1
- 18 Worse, or ..... 2
- 19 About the same as it is now? ..... 3

**(DO NOT 3** [ Don't know ..... X  
**READ)→ -** [ Refused.....R

12. Now, I'd like you to try to imagine what life will be like in the year 2050 for older people. Which of the following comes closest to what you think life will be like 50 years from now? **(READ LIST. ENTER SINGLE RESPONSE.)**

- 56 80 year olds will be able to do and enjoy virtually everything that 40 year olds can do today ..... 1
- 21 80 year olds will be much healthier than they are today, but they will still be very limited in their capabilities compared to younger people ..... 2
- 20 Life will be about the same for 80 year olds in the year 2050 as it is today..... 3
- 1 [ Life/Health will be worse in 2050 than today ..... 4

**(DO NOT 2** [ Don't know ..... X  
**READ)→ -** [ Refused.....R

13. Which, if any, of the following medical breakthroughs do you think will occur within the next 50 years?

Do you think **(INSERT AND RANDOMIZE)** will occur within the next 50 years?

	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>	<u>Don't Know</u>	<u>Refused</u>
A cure for cancer.....	1 79	2	X	R
A cure for AIDS.....	1 78	2	X	R
A cure for Alzheimer's disease.....	1 72	2	X	R
A cure for heart disease.....	1 68	2	X	R
Being able to preserve the human body though deep freeze so it can be brought back to life in the future .....	1 29	2	X	R
(None of these.....)	4)			

14. Do you happen to know which is the fastest growing age group in the United States? Is it... **(READ LIST. ENTER SINGLE RESPONSE.)**

23	People under age 18.....	1
44	People aged 35 to 50, or.....	2
28	People aged 85 and older.....	3
<b>(DO NOT</b>	5 [ Don't know .....	X
<b>READ)→ - [</b>	Refused.....	R

15. In general, how would you rate your health? Would you say it is... **(READ LIST. ENTER SINGLE RESPONSE.)**

26	Excellent .....	1
57	Good .....	2
15	Fair, or.....	3
3	Poor .....	4
<b>(DO NOT</b>	- [ Don't know .....	X
<b>READ)→ - [</b>	Refused.....	R

16. Are you or is your spouse a member of AARP, The American Association of Retired Persons?

22	Yes.....	1
78	No .....	2
-	Don't know .....	X
-	Refused.....	R