

Number of children affects lifespan of mothers

26th January 2026



A new study suggests that the number of children a woman has might affect her rate of ageing and her lifespan. Research from the University of Helsinki in Finland found that women who had five children or more, or no children, aged

faster than those who had a small number of kids. Researcher Mikaela Hukkanen said: "From an evolutionary biology perspective, organisms have limited resources, such as time and energy. When a large amount of energy is invested in reproduction, it is taken away from bodily maintenance and repair mechanisms, which could reduce lifespan." She added that the finding of shorter lifespans of women who never gave birth was "surprising".

The researchers used historical data in their analysis of parenthood and ageing. They analysed the health data on 14,836 women. Researchers examined DNA data and blood samples, then modelled the effects of reproduction on women's rates of ageing and longevity. Ms Hukkanen postulated that having a smaller number of pregnancies could have favourable effects on a mother's health. One benefit is a possible lower risk of breast and ovarian cancer. However, the "wear and tear" and physical demands of multiple childbirths can negate this lowered risk. Another factor that could increase longevity is the increased social support a mother receives from the state for having children.

Sources: [scientificamerican.com](https://www.scientificamerican.com) / lifespan.io / helsinki.fi

Writing

Governments should provide lots of money for people to have children. Discuss.

Chat

Talk about these words from the article.

study / children / mother / ageing / evolutionary / biology / energy / reproduction / parenthood / health data / DNA / blood samples / cancer / longevity / childbirth

True / False

- 1) The research is from a university in the capital of Finland. T / F
- 2) The study says mothers who have six or more children live longer. T / F
- 3) The study says women who had no children aged faster. T / F
- 4) The effort of reproduction can impede the body's ability to self-repair. T / F
- 5) The study is based on over 14 thousand women who gave birth recently. T / F
- 6) The study says having a few babies could help women to live longer. T / F
- 7) The study says having a few babies could lower the risk of cancer. T / F
- 8) Increased government support for mothers has no impact on lifespans. T / F

Synonym Match

(The words in **bold** are from the news article.)

- | | |
|-------------------------|----------------|
| 1. study | a. procreation |
| 2. affect | b. spent |
| 3. perspective | c. government |
| 4. invested | d. statistics |
| 5. reproduction | e. influence |
| 6. data | f. specimens |
| 7. samples | g. damage |
| 8. favourable | h. report |
| 9. wear and tear | i. positive |
| 10. state | j. viewpoint |

Discussion – Student A

- a) What's the best number of children to have?
- b) What do you think of the cost of having children?
- c) Why are people having fewer children in many countries?
- d) What are the benefits of having children?
- e) What do you know about evolutionary biology?
- f) What link do you think there is between childbirth and longevity?
- g) What effect do you think children have on fathers' longevity?
- h) How can governments encourage people to have more children?

Phrase Match

1. affect her rate of ageing and
 2. from an evolutionary
 3. organisms have limited
 4. energy is invested
 5. shorter lifespans
 6. historical
 7. DNA data and
 8. a possible lower risk of breast
 9. wear and
 10. Another factor that could increase
- a. of women
 - b. resources
 - c. tear
 - d. data
 - e. longevity
 - f. biology perspective
 - g. and ovarian cancer
 - h. her lifespan
 - i. blood samples
 - j. in reproduction

Discussion – Student B

- a) What do you think about what you read?
- b) What are the benefits of not having children?
- c) Why do women live longer than men?
- d) How can we reduce the 'wear and tear' on our body?
- e) What three adjectives best describe this news story?
- f) What will birth rates be like in the future?
- g) What kind of support should states give mothers?
- h) What questions would you like to ask the researchers?

Spelling

1. her rate of iangge (British English spelling)
2. rntauyvooile biology
3. icvepspteer
4. sgmaronis have limited resources
5. taken away from bodily ninamctaeen
6. repair hsencmamsi
7. trcsliihao data
8. rates of ageing and lvogetiyn
9. Ms Hukkanen poealtstdu that
10. a smaller number of enagirncesp
11. breast and vranai cancer
12. physical demands of mpilutel childbirths

Answers – Synonym Match

1. h	2. e	3. j	4. b	5. a
6. d	7. f	8. i	9. g	10. c

Comprehension Questions

Listen to / read the news article. Answer these questions.
(Answers are on p. 27 of the 27-page PDF.)

1.	What university is the research from?
2.	How many children might a woman have to affect her healthy adversely?
3.	From what perspective did Mikaela Hukkanen look at her findings?
4.	What does reproduction take energy away from?
5.	How did Hukkanen feel about lifespans of women who never gave birth?
6.	What kind of data did the researchers use in this study?
7.	What did the researchers examine besides DNA data?
8.	What could have could have favourable effects on a mother's health?
9.	What kinds of cancer could be lowered by having just a few children?
10.	Who might mothers receive support from?

Speaking – Motherhood

Rank these with your partner. Put the best joys of parenthood at the top. Change partners often and share your rankings.

- A baby says "mummy"
- Bath time
- Playing with baby
- Food time
- Sleeping with baby
- Baby's first steps
- Taking baby for a walk
- Baby laughter

Answers – True False

1 T	2 F	3 T	4 T	5 F	6 T	7 T	8 F
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Answers to Phrase Match and Spelling are in the text.