

What Is the Perfect Age?

Researchers are studying when we feel our best and why—giving new relevance to the question of the ideal age.

By

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Are your best years ahead of you or behind you?

The ideal age is a question that Jay Olshansky thinks about often. Dr. Olshansky, an epidemiologist, is researching ways to slow down the process of aging, by studying things like the genetics of long-lived individuals.

“If you had a pill that could stop biological aging in its tracks, when would you take it?” asks Dr. Olshansky, a professor at UIC School of Public Health in Chicago.

He asks his university students this question. Many think 30 is old, so they would take the pill in their 20s. He asked his father, then 95 years old. His father said 50 was the best year because the kids were grown and he was in good health. Dr. Olshansky, 63, says life is good for him now, but if he had to pick a perfect year, it would probably be 50, too, because that was before he started having little aches and pains.

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Researchers like Dr. Olshansky are trying to understand the mysteries of longevity and at what ages we feel our best and why. They measure worry and stress levels at different times in our life and peak years for having fun, the hope being that if people reach satisfaction with life at a certain age, they might have advice for the rest of us. Such exploration in the world of science and health is putting a more concrete focus on the seemingly inscrutable question of the perfect age.

Some of their findings might surprise us. Many people in their 50s don't want to be 30. Seventy-year-olds are among the most satisfied, perhaps because they are also among the group seen as “time affluent.” Less surprising is that no one, regardless of age, wants to look or feel old, which is why anti-aging creams that promise to remove wrinkles and eye bags sell so well.

But is there an age that is better than all the rest?

No, says Laura Carstensen, director of the Stanford Center on Longevity. “There are too many variables,” she says. For some people, the perfect age is when our opportunities are greatest, which

would skew younger. For others, it's when life satisfaction is greatest, which skews older. Others say it's when they are at their physical peak or have the most friends—in their 20s or 30s.

It's easier, though also not without pitfalls, to determine the best age for specific things like getting married, for instance, because researchers can look at evidence such as divorce rates. [One study](#) says the best age to wed is between 28 and 32. If you want to have children, it's best to start before the age of 32, [according to fertility data](#) from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. Apparently, 36 is the age that women want to look, based on the photos they bring in, says New York City-based dermatologist Gervaise Gerstner. [The optimum age for marathon performance](#) is 27 for men and 29 for women, according to a study by Spanish researchers Plataforma SINC on ScienceDaily.com.

THE NUMBERS GAME

Looking for the best age to get married, have a child or make a big financial decision? So are a lot of researchers and here's a sampling of findings.

Getting Married: 28-32

Waiting to wed reduces the odds of divorce—by 11% a year—but waiting too long increases the odds by 5% annually, says Nicholas Wolfinger, a sociologist at the University of Utah, who looked at divorce rates in a [2015 study](#). Those who wait longer may be “congenitally cantankerous” people who put off marriage because they can't find anyone to marry them, he says.

Having Children: before 32

That's the age when fertility starts to drop off, [according to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists](#). The decline becomes precipitous after 37.

Making financial decisions: peak around 50

To measure financial literacy, researchers at Texas Tech University in a [study published in 2016](#) asked 16 questions about borrowing, investing and insurance. They found the average scores increased within each year up to roughly age 50. After 60, financial literacy begins to fall.

Getting a cell phone: 12

[It's a hot topic](#) that is getting increasing scrutiny. [One 2016 survey](#) by American Express found parents judged the average acceptable age for a cell phone was 12, consistent with findings the previous three years.

Mastering Vocabulary:

late 60s, early 70s

Neuroscientists at MIT and Massachusetts General Hospital [gathered data from nearly 50,000 subjects](#) and found that this age group is tops at mastering vocabulary—all those years of reading paying off.

Processing Information: 18-19

The MIT/Massachusetts General Hospital study cited for mastering vocabulary also found younger people, while not the top wordsmiths, superior at raw speed in processing information.

Bodybuilding: 25

Physical strength peaks at around 25 years of age, about when muscle mass peaks, too, according to [an article on the website sportsci.org](#). Strength plateaus from 35-40, then falls, with a 25% loss of peak force by the age of 65.

The perfect age at which to live is trickier. [A 2013 survey by Allure magazine](#) put it at 31, based on responses from 2,000 people, men and women ages 18 to 69, across the U.S. (More recently, Allure decided to stop using the term “anti-aging” in its coverage.) If people could live forever in good health at a particular age, it would be 50, according to a 2013 Harris Poll. Gender and geography play a role: In the poll, men said the perfect age is 47, and women 53. In the Midwest, the perfect age is 50. In the East, it’s 53 and the West it’s 47.

Even the perfect age can age. Blair Welch, a 27-year-old certified public accountant in Washington, D.C., says each year gets better, in part because it’s taking her further away from the unsettling early 20s. “I think your 20s are a very confusing and insecure time,” she says.

Many people say it’s not a number but a certain feeling or stage of life. When the children were little, say some. When the children were gone, say others.

Joe Cimperman, president of Global Cleveland, a non-profit economic development group, says the perfect age is the “exact time that you realize how absolutely short life is” and “how completely lucky you are.” He realized that this year at the age of 47 after two dear friends died, one a father of seven who died in a car accident and the other, a mentor, who died from cancer.

Jennifer Barker of Pittsburgh, who has four children, turned 40 in September and thinks that is perfect. “You are old enough to realize what is important,” she says, and young enough to look forward to future years and discoveries. At the same time, her 20-month-old is full of curiosity and joy and seems at a perfect age, and her grandfather seemed the perfect age at 85 when he was in good health and told inspiring stories. “So the perfect age?” I don’t believe there is one,” she says. “For me, my perfect age is my age now.”

Seventy is good when it comes to psychological well-being and life satisfaction, according to Arthur Stone, a professor of psychology at the University of Southern California. [In a 2015 study](#), Dr. Stone, along with researchers from Stony Brook University, Princeton University and University College London, found that worry follows us from ages 20 to 50. That is likely due to the expected anxieties during those years about money, job, and children.

Those worries, along with stress, begin to diminish starting at about age 50, and well-being climbs to about age 70, when people are less anxious but still healthy, he says. “People settle into who they are and accept and make the best of it,” he says.

Dr. Stone says he often asks people in their late 50s and 60s if they would prefer to be in their 30s. Except for one person, a radio talk-show host, no one wanted to be younger again. “That was fascinating to me,” he says. “People didn’t want it. There was too much confusion and stuff going on.”

Ken Dychtwald, founder and CEO of Age Wave, a California-based consulting firm specializing in aging-related issues, says he would love to have his body “in my 30s for 100 years but I don’t want to be 30 again.” At 30, he had not yet fallen in love, had his children, or established his career. Nor did he have as much self-knowledge, resilience or compassion. “I’m so much wiser at 60 than I was at 40,” says the 63-year-old.

He’s also enjoying himself. People at 65 to 74, the so-called time affluent, reported having more fun than any other age group, according to a 2016 study of 3,712 adults 25 and older released by Age Wave and Merrill Lynch.

The ones having the least fun were those ages 35 to 54.

(Is there an ideal age? Researchers are looking to understand at what ages we feel our best and why—but is the perfect age a number, a certain feeling or a stage of life? Email us at socialmedia@wsj.com with your comments.)