

Subjective Aging

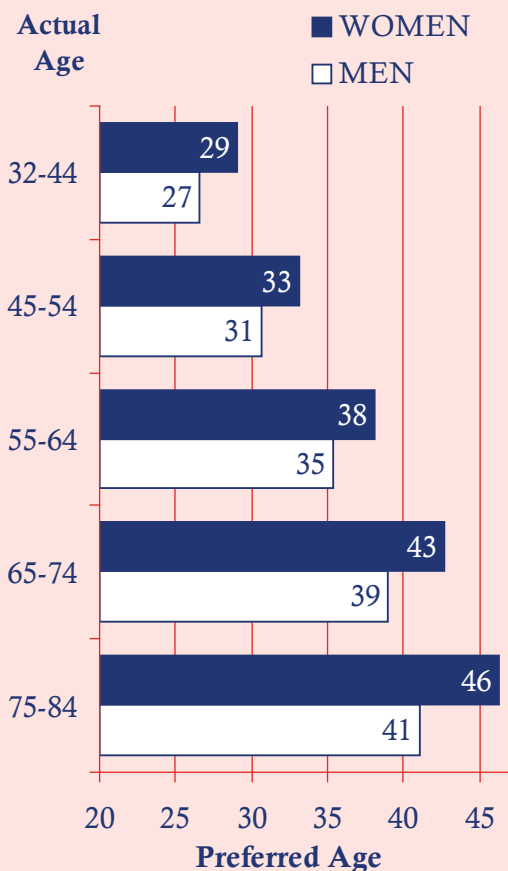
Importance of how old you feel

MIDUS
Midlife in the United States

A National Study of Health & Well-Being

Age is measured in terms of years and months a person has lived since birth, but many people do not feel that their chronological age matches how old they feel – something we call their “subjective age”. Some report feeling the same as their actual age, while others feel older, and many report feeling younger than they actually are. As described in the next sections, we learned that the answers MIDUS respondents gave to how old they feel as well as what age they would like to be showed interesting variation depending on their age, gender, health status, and activity levels.

FIGURE 1
ACTUAL AGE AND PREFERRED AGE



Overall, MIDUS respondents would like to be about 20 years younger than they actually are. However, the difference between actual and preferred ages varies a lot depending on how old they are and whether they are female or male.

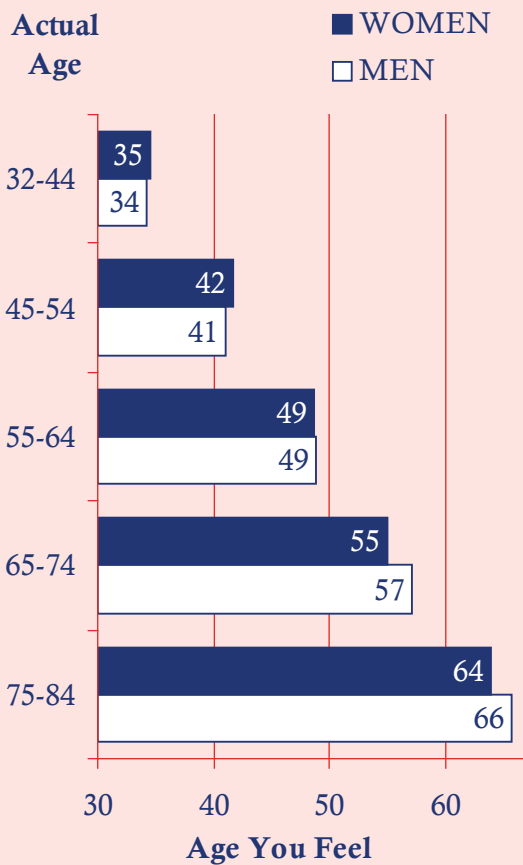
- ◆ As people grow older, the difference between their actual and preferred age gets much larger (see Figure 1). While young adults (aged 32-44) would prefer to be in their late 20s, older adults (aged 75-84) indicate they would prefer to be in their early to mid 40s.
- ◆ Men, on average, would prefer to be younger (about age 33) than women, who on average would prefer to be about age 36.
- ◆ The gap between the age that men would like to be and the age that women would like to be increases with age. Young adult men and women (aged 32-44) show a gap of about 2 ½ years between their preferred ages, while older adults (aged 75-84) show a gender gap of about five years (see Figure 1). In all instances, men want to be younger than women.

The age a person feels changes across adulthood

Although adults do not feel as young as their preferred ages, on average, they report feeling approximately 10 years younger than their biological age.

However, older adults report larger gaps between their actual age and how old they feel (see Figure 2). Thus, adults aged 75-84 report feeling about 64 years old, a difference of up to 20 years. Adults aged 32-44, however, report feeling about 34 years old, which is only a difference of up to 10 years.

FIGURE 2
ACTUAL AGE AND HOW OLD YOU FEEL



ANTI-AGING OUTLOOK

Growing older is viewed quite negatively by many in the U.S. A recent survey reports that 90 million Americans have purchased products or received procedures in an effort to hide physical signs of aging.¹ Perhaps this is why MIDUS respondents report wanting to be considerably younger than they actually are.

Older adults do not report more age discrimination

Despite the anti-aging presence in United States culture, the oldest adults do not report the most age discrimination. Age discrimination is reported among all age groups, but middle-aged adults (aged 55-64) report the highest levels of age discrimination.

When considering only adults who report experiencing any kind of discrimination, over half of those aged 55-84 attribute age as a reason for the discrimination they experienced.

Adults who feel younger have more education

A number of factors distinguish between adults who feel younger and those who feel older. Among adults feeling younger, 41% have earned at least a 4-year college degree, while only 23% of adults who feel older have obtained such levels of education.

Adults who feel younger are also more likely to have higher incomes and report that they have more control over their financial situation. Adults who feel older are more than three times as likely as those who feel younger to report that they don't have enough money to meet their needs.

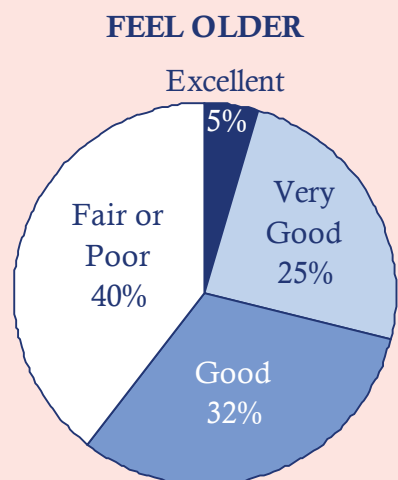
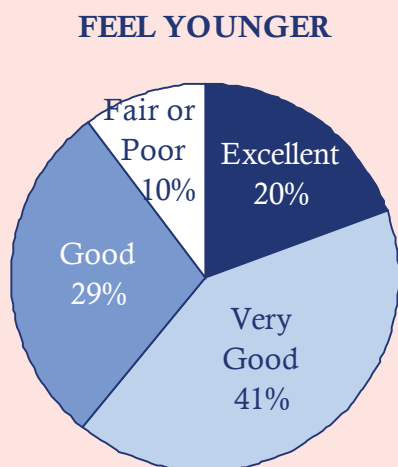


Adults who feel younger are healthier

People who feel younger than their actual age are more likely to report that their health is excellent or very good (61%), in comparison to 30% of people who feel older (see Figure 3). Additionally, while only 10% of adults who feel younger report their health as fair or poor, 40% of adults who feel older report fair or poor health. Adults who feel younger are also more likely to report that they have more control over their health and that they put more

FIGURE 3

REPORTED PHYSICAL HEALTH STATUS OF ADULTS WHO:

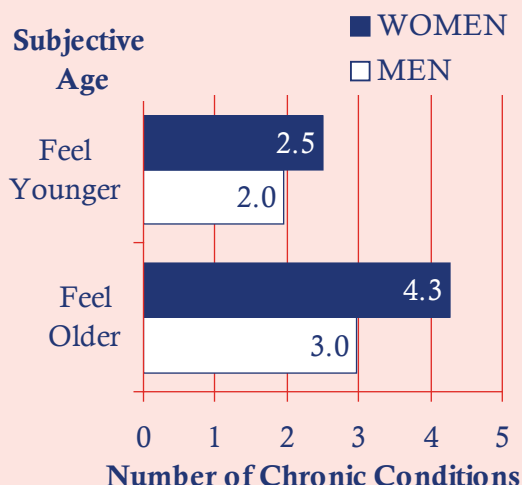


effort into their health than adults who feel older. In addition, adults who feel younger expect to be in better health 10 years in the future than adults who feel older.

Adults who feel younger than their actual age also report fewer chronic conditions in the previous year (see Figure 4) than adults who feel older. A chronic condition refers to a persistent illness or condition, such as diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease. Adults

FIGURE 4

NUMBER OF CHRONIC CONDITIONS



who feel older report more difficulty with basic activities, such as bathing, dressing, or walking one block, as well as more strenuous activities such as carrying groceries, climbing several flights of stairs, or walking several blocks.

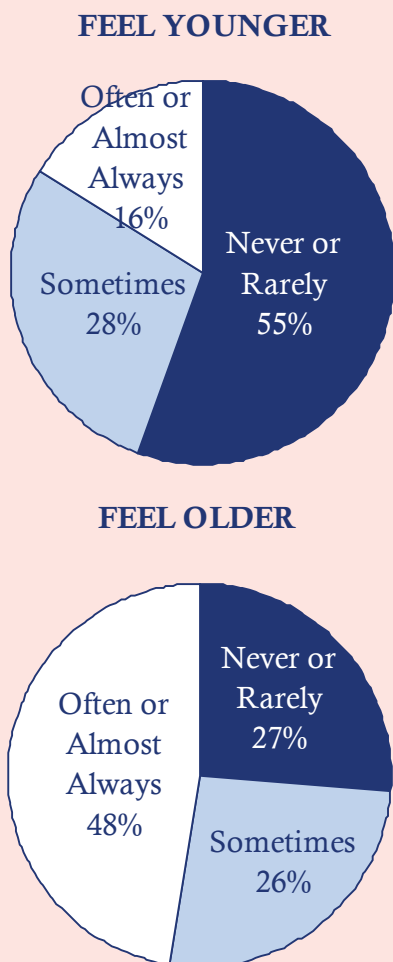
Adults who feel younger than their actual age are less likely to report they have experienced heart trouble in the past, with 16% reporting heart trouble in comparison to 26% of adults who feel older.



Adults who feel younger have more energy and sleep more

In comparison to adults who feel older, those who feel younger are more likely to feel that their energy level and memory have improved or stayed the same over the last five years. Adults who feel older are more likely to feel that their energy level and memory have gotten a lot worse over the last five years, with 26% reporting that their energy level has gotten a lot worse, in comparison to 5% of adults who feel younger.

FIGURE 5
FEEL UNRESTED DURING THE DAY



Adults who feel younger report more hours of sleep per week than adults who feel older, and they are much less likely to report that they feel unrested during the day. Among adults who feel younger, 55% report that they never or rarely feel unrested during the day, in comparison to 27% of adults who feel older (see Figure 5). In fact, 48% of adults who feel older report that they often or almost always feel unrested during the day.

Adults who feel younger have fewer risk factors for future disease

Adults who feel younger than their actual age are less likely to have characteristics that are risk factors for future disease.

- ◆ While 28% of adults who feel younger are current smokers, 42% of adults who feel older smoke.
- ◆ Body mass index (BMI) is a reliable indicator of total body fat in an individual. Adults who feel younger are more likely to have a BMI in the normal range (33%) in comparison to only 17% of adults who feel older. Adults who feel older are more likely to be obese (48%), in comparison to 26% of adults who feel younger.

These risk factors can lead to future illness and disease, as demonstrated by previous evidence. Adults who feel older also report taking more medications than adults who feel younger, and they report going to the doctor, on average, almost five times a year, in comparison to adults who feel younger, who visit the doctor an average of 3 ½ times a year.



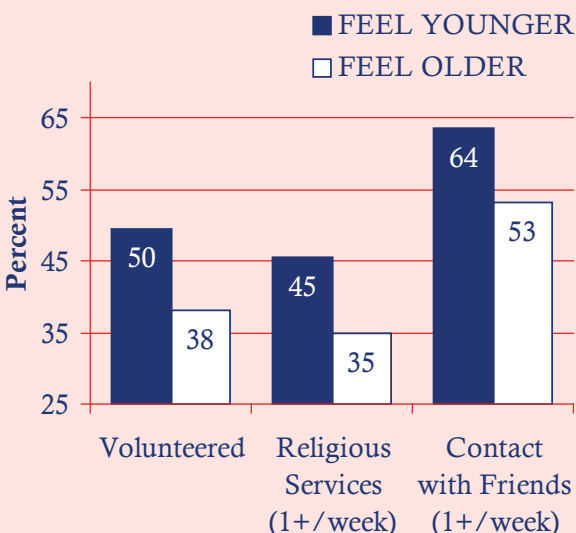
Adults who feel younger are more socially active

Adults who feel younger than their actual age are more socially active than adults who feel older. For example, 50% of those who feel younger report that they volunteered in the past year and 45% report they attended religious services at least once a week (see Figure 6). Among adults who feel older, 38% volunteered and 35% attended religious services at least once a week.

Adults who feel younger are also more likely to report contact with friends at least once a week, with 64% reporting such contact in comparison to 53% of adults who feel older.

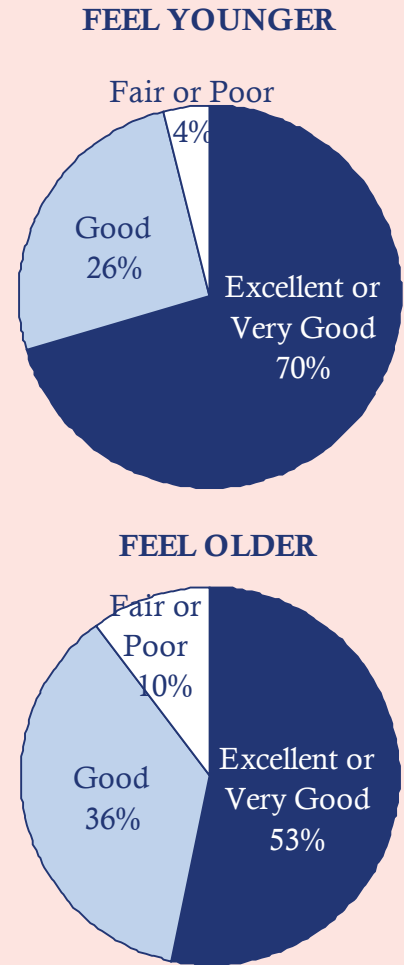
Adults who feel younger are also more likely to feel that they have contributed positively to others over the course of their lives, with 70% reporting contributions to others that have been excellent or very good in comparison to 54% of adults who feel older (see Figure 7).

FIGURE 6
SOCIAL ACTIVITY IN THE PAST YEAR



In addition, adults who feel younger report less strain and more support from their families in comparison to adults who feel older.

FIGURE 7
CONTRIBUTIONS TO OTHERS OVER WHOLE LIFE



Adults who feel younger report more control and greater life purpose

People who feel younger report more control over their lives and greater purpose in life in comparison to adults who feel older. This is especially true of women who feel older, as they report the lowest levels of sense of control and life purpose.



When does middle age begin and end?

People also differ in their views about what defines middle age. Men, for example, feel that midlife begins and ends at earlier ages than women and they also believe that women make these transitions earlier than they do. Women do not see differences between themselves and men (see Figure 8).

As people get older, their views of what defines middle age also go up. For example, young adults (aged 32-44) report that middle age lasts from about

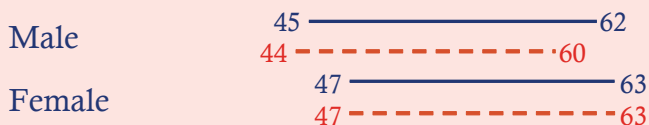
age 43 to 59, while older adults (aged 75-84) report that it lasts from about age 50 to 65 (see Figure 8).

There are also education differences in views of what defines middle age. Those with more education report that middle age begins earlier but ends later, with the most educated adults reporting that middle age lasts from about age 45 to 63, while the least educated adults report that middle age lasts from about age 47 to 61 (see Figure 8). Interestingly, adults with the least education are especially likely to report that women enter and exit middle age earlier than men do, although this trend exists across all levels of education.

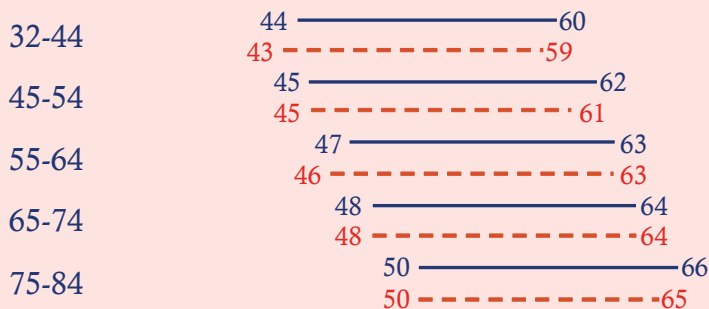
FIGURE 8

MIDDLE AGE RANGE ——— FOR MEN
- - - - - FOR WOMEN

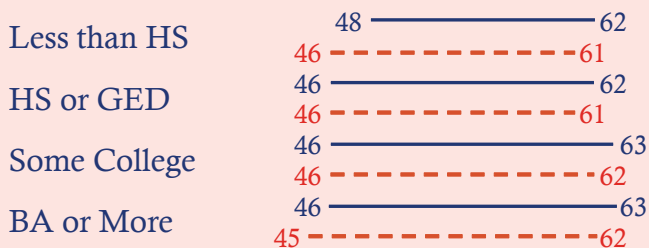
GENDER



AGE



EDUCATION



1. National Consumers League (2004). New survey reveals consumers confused about, but overwhelming use, anti-aging products and procedures.
<http://www.nclnet.org/news/2004/antiaging.htm>

WHAT COMES FIRST?

While the evidence presented here suggests that the age an adult feels is linked with many differences in health and social involvements, it is unclear if these age perceptions lead to such effects. For example, having poorer health and being less socially involved may also contribute to feeling older than one actually is. Investigators on the MIDUS team will carry out more complex analyses to try to resolve how subjective aging influences health, energy levels, sleep, social activity, and sense of control, as well as how these factors contribute to how old people feel.

MIDLIFE IN THE UNITED STATES

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