Women's Reproductive Life Span May Be Increasing

An uptick in women's reproductive years might delay the onset of certain diseases while developing others.

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The female reproductive life span has increased by 2.1 years, according to findings from a recent study. Published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), the inquiry found that the window of time in which women can reliably conceive and carry a healthy baby to term now extends to age 37.1 rather than age 35. In addition, results showed that women are experiencing menarche, or the onset of menstruation, earlier and menopause, or the cessation of menstruation, later, reports abcnews.go.com.

Researchers said these biological trends could have significant implications for women's health. While a lengthier reproductive life span could translate into a decline in cardiovascular disease, this could also indirectly cause a surge in the incidence of breast cancer, ovarian cancer and endometrial cancer, Jennifer Ashton, MD, ABC News' chief medical correspondent and a board-certified ob-gyn, told the outlet. These hormone-sensitive cancers develop in response to the body's production of hormones, such as estrogen and progesterone.

"The more hormonal stimulation [there is] across a woman's lifetime," the greater the risk for certain cancers, Ashton said.

After reviewing reproductive data collected between 1959 and 2018, researchers found that the average age of menarche decreased from 13.5 to 12.7 years. Additionally, scientists noted that the average age of menopause increased from 48.4 to 49.9 during the past 60 years.

Investigators also found that ethnicity, genetics and nutritional intake affected women's experience of menopause as well as their reproductive life span.

In the future, Duke Appiah, PhD, MPH, an assistant professor of public health at Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center (TTUHSC) and the first author of the study, plans to see how age and menopause are associated with "cardiac structure and function—for instance, how the heart beats and how the heart becomes enlarged with age," according to a TTU press release.

For more insights about menstruation, read "Study Sheds Light on Menstruation Around the World." Also, for more about the effects of a longer female reproductive life span on breast cancer

risk, read “Menopause Hormone Therapy Raises Breast Cancer Risk, Study Confirms.”

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