

Childless couples have higher risk of dying prematurely but adopting may reduce chances of an early death

By [Jenny Hope](#)

Most parents have claimed at one stage that their children will be the death of them - but the reverse could be true.

A new study suggests being childless may increase the risk of dying prematurely, especially in women. Scientists say the study throws new light on the age-old question of whether life fulfilment provided by children can actually extend your years.

A new study suggests having children reduces the risk of an early death

The answer appears to be yes - but only compared with people who want children and are unable to have them. In these circumstances, adoption may reduce the risk of early death, according to Danish scientists. But their investigation did not look at whether couples who choose to be childless are likely to have shorter lives as a result.

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Among possible reasons for early death rates are risky behaviours, such as more drinking and drug abuse, depression and psychiatric illness, and physical illness linked to their infertility. Professor Esben Agerbo, of Aarhus University, who led the research, said the study was a 'natural experiment' because it only analysed data from parents who wanted a child and were actively seeking to do so using IVF treatment.

He said it found an 'association' between being childless and dying prematurely but no link with higher rates of mental illness.

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He said 'Mindful that association is not causation, our study suggests that the mortality rates are higher in the childless.

'Rates of psychiatric illness do not appear to vary with childlessness, but in parents who adopt it is decreased.' The study investigated death rates among 21,276 couples in Denmark registered for IVF treatment, which meant they all started out wanting a baby. Among women who remained childless, the early death rate from circulatory disease, cancers, and accidents amongst women was four times as high as that amongst those who subsequently gave birth to their own child, The early death rate was 50 per cent lower among women who adopted, says the study published online in the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health (must credit).. Rates of death were around twice as high among men who did not become parents, either biologically or through adoption.

Rates of mental ill health were similar between couples with or without children of their own, with the exception of slightly higher rates of drug and alcohol problems among childless couples. The study found rates of mental illness in couples who adopted children was around half that of biological parents, but this may not be a true finding, said the study. The researchers based their findings on data from population registers in Denmark on births and deaths, assisted conception (IVF) procedures, hospital admissions, psychiatric service contacts, and labour market statistics for the period from 1994 to 2008. Between 1994 and 2005, 21,276 childless couples were registered for IVF treatment with 15,210 children born and 1,564 adopted. In Denmark, many parents who want to adopt have to complete a course of IVF treatment first. The study found the rate of adoption was highest among wealthy people who tend to live longer and experience less psychiatric illness, this might have affected the outcome, they said. Critics of the study said it was probably not representative of couples in general but showed that having a child was likely to be a much more important goal in life for people actively seeking medical treatment. As a result the findings suggest those who fulfil their life goals have better overall health than those who do not. Previous Danish research suggested childless women having IVF run a greater risk of suffering mental health problems if they fail to have a baby. They seek help because they are desperate to start a family, but are a fifth more likely to end up in hospital suffering from psychiatric disorders than women who succeed in falling pregnant, a study found.