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# BLOGS & STORIES

## Why Do Cougars Die Young?

by *Hannah Seligson*

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READ THIS SKIP THAT

**A new study says women who wed men who are much older—or much younger—have an increased risk of death. Hannah Seligson on why marrying outside your age range might be hazardous to your health.**

Rare is the study that unites cougars and gold-diggers. But according to recent numbers from the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research in Germany, women who marry much younger men and women who marry much older men have something in common—both groups suffer an increased risk of death.

Why would age-gap relationships affect a women's longevity?

The reasons depend on which group you fall into. For younger women with older husbands, life expectancy can be both the cause and the effect. "When a younger woman marries an older man, he is more likely to die before she does," says Dr. David Eigen, a Boca Raton-based psychologist and author of *Women—The Goddesses of Wisdom*. "And we know that when one spouse dies, the other is more likely to die within a few years." In other words, take up with an older man, and be prepared to take on some of his risk of death, too.



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Younger women are particularly at risk when it comes to kicking the bucket soon after their older husband dies because they tend to be more financially dependent on him. "After the death of a spouse, there's the greater possibility women will suffer financial hardship, which can weigh on a person," says Eigen. Call it the Anna Nicole Smith Effect—a year after the death of her billionaire husband, 69 years her senior, the busty blonde was in bankruptcy and ensnared in multiple legal battles.

But even if your older gentleman is still breathing, he may not be huffing along vigorously enough to keep you young. "A younger woman living with an older guy is more likely to be doing activities that, well, don't keep her young," says Eigen, "like playing bingo."

And even if your husband *is* keeping you active, it might not be the right kind of active. "Women who marry older men often become caregivers, and caregiving is stressful and can shorten a women's life span by about 25 percent," says Debbie Mandel, author of *Addicted to Stress: A Woman's 7 Step Program to Reclaim Joy and Spontaneity in Life*.

So trade in your aging husband for a younger, fresher face and increase your longevity in the process? Unfortunately, it's not that simple. The study's researchers say the age gap cuts both ways, and that even women who marry the strapping young mountain biker—the so-called cougars—may see their risk of death increase as well.

A 2003 study by AARP found that 34 percent of all women over 40 in the survey were dating younger men, and 35 percent preferred it to dating older men. Mandel says that women in these relationships—the kind that shows like Courteney Cox's *Cougar Town* have made icons of—are put under a particular strain when it comes to aging and

body image, even more so than women who are married to men their own age. "When your husband is young and your body is changing, you are more stressed and insecure than the average woman.

"Stress is an inflammatory process, which causes cardiovascular problems, and has been implicated in many disease processes as well as exacerbating symptoms," says Mandel. This can also, she says, lead older women to exercise addiction and severe dieting.

Dr. Richard A. Friedman, a professor of clinical psychiatry at Weil Cornell Medical College in New York City, agrees. "Maybe there is something more stressful, socially and physically, about the role of being the older woman in a couple. They have to keep up with their younger and more energetic husbands."

Susan Winter, the author of *Older Women, Younger Men* who has lived with (and been married to) men that have ranged from 16 to 22 years her junior, says it's not easy to live outside the social sanctions.

"I know. I've done it," she says. "In essence, women are dying earlier because society invalidates their choice of partner. So maybe it is the limited social construct that kills, not the mate's age."

Which means that the increasing normalization of older women with younger men could make a difference. Samantha Jones, Madonna, and Demi Moore just might save us yet.

"Without that societally imposed stress, a later study may prove it's actually healthier for women to have a younger husband," says Winter.

So forced to choose—for your lifespan's sake, of course—is it healthier to go younger or older?

According to the study, women marrying a partner seven to nine years younger increase their relative mortality risk by 20 percent compared with couples who are both the same age. If your partner is seven to nine years older, your relative mortality increases by only 8 percent.

But personally, Winter doesn't care. "As for me," she says, "I would rather die of a heart attack in bed with my younger man than die of boredom changing adult Pampers."

*Hannah Seligson is a journalist. Her book, [A Little Bit Married: How to Know When It's Time to Walk Down the Aisle or Out the Door](#), which spotlights and uncovers a major trend in dating today, the long-term unmarried relationship, was published by Da Capo Press on Jan. 15.*

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