



## Director's Note

"OK, Boomer"

Maybe you've heard the phrase, or heard about how the younger generation uses it to quickly dismiss the lectures they're tired of hearing from the older generation. As someone who studies aging and a boomer myself, I find it wonderfully ironic that my generation—famous for not listening to its elders—is now being treated that way by a new younger cohort. As HRS Director, the phrase has another meaning to me. The HRS was started almost thirty years ago because of concerns about what would happen when the baby boomers got old. The sheer number of people born 1946–1964 promised to change our ability to provide pensions, Social Security, Medicare, and other support systems that care for older people in this country. Would they be OK? Would we be OK?

For the last 15 years, HRS has been recruiting baby boomers to the study in their early 50s, starting with the oldest boomers in 2004 and continuing through the youngest. We're incredibly grateful for their participation because we know all the demands they face at work, caring for parents, children, and grandchildren, and worrying about their own health. We can start to ask now, are they OK? The answer is mixed. Trends in health are not going very well. The numbers of people saying they had health problems that limited their ability to work went up from 18% of boomers aged 51–56 in 2004 to 25% of boomers aged 51–56 in 2016. An important part of that is pain—32% said they had frequent pain in 2004 but 40% did in 2016. Boomers are working through the pain. Despite these health challenges, boomers aged 51–56 in 2016 were slightly more likely to work than boomers aged 51–56 in 2004. Younger boomers were less likely to be married and less likely to own a home in 2016 than the early boomers in 2004.

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One thing we know is that a lot can happen from your mid-50s to your late 60s that will determine what retirement will be like. That's why we're going to do our best in the years to come to follow up with all the boomer groups to see if they're OK.

**David Weir, Director**

Health and Retirement Study

## Thinking of Retiring?

Many of us look forward to retirement as a reward at the end of our working lives. But retiring sooner rather than later might not be the healthiest path for everyone. More and more people are extending their working lives, and this might be a good thing for some people. Poor health is a major reason for leaving the labor force before normal retirement ages. But even accounting for that difference, people who retire at younger ages have worse physical functioning at later ages compared to people who work longer. Working longer may help keep us active and decrease health risks.

Source: Azar and others, *Journal of Aging and Health*, 2019



## Having a Life Purpose May Improve Health

Having a purpose in life is something many people search for. It can help add meaning to our lives and can help guide our daily decisions. But finding purpose may also make us healthier. Comparing HRS participants having a strong sense of purpose to those with less purpose in life, medical researchers found that those with a stronger sense of purpose in life tend to live longer. Having a sense of purpose seems to be associated with better health. Finding a life goal or mission may help people extend their lives.

Source: Alimujiang and others, *JAMA Network Open*, 2019





# We Asked—You Told Us

Last year we asked you to share with us your positive experiences of being a participant in the Health and Retirement Study. We appreciate your taking the time to let us know what it means to you.

## Investment in the Research

“I think it is interesting because it helps future generations.”

“I think the study is very worthwhile because I can read in the newsletter some of the results that come from it and I’m all for that. It’s helping people. I’m just all for any kind of study that does help people, especially older people, because we need all the help we can get. And it’s very interesting to read your newsletter to see all the different aspects of life that you are finding out from this study.”

## Positive Interviewer Feedback

“This has been a very, very good experience. I’ve enjoyed it. I like all the people who came to me, they were nice and pleasant.”

“We’ve been doing it for years and we’ve met a lot of nice people. We like the information that they give as well as what we give them ... we’d be glad to keep doing it.”

“Everybody that’s interviewed me has been very polite. I really have had no problems at all; they’ve all been pleasant and nice. They’ve explained everything really well with the blood tests and the walking portion and things like that. They’ve explained everything very well.”

“You have wonderful people working for you. The interviewers are very down-to-earth and make me feel very comfortable. I feel honored to be a part of this study.”



## The Study is Giving and Receiving

“It is a joy to have someone come to my house... And I appreciate you all taking my blood and sending me the results for me to give to my doctor, I really appreciate that. I look forward to someone coming to talk to me again.”

“It’s been enlightening to learn how two individuals can progress as they age and become disabled... my husband has been disabled for 10 years, and we always look forward to receiving the forms to fill out.”

“The study is perfect, but my neighbors, and my brother want to participate.”



# Using Skype to Beat the Blues

Technology is constantly evolving, creating new ways that we can communicate with each other. A popular and interactive way to communicate today is video chat. Video chat allows people to connect to friends and family while seeing each other in real time, no matter the distance between them. HRS participants who communicated with friends and family using video chat were half as likely to experience depressive symptoms over a two year period as those who did not use this form of communication. Actually seeing our friends' and family's faces across the miles seems to help boost our spirits.

Source: Teo and others, *The American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 2019



## Lifelong Learning and Well-Being

More education leads to better health in later life. We can't go back in time to get more education, but we can continue learning throughout our lives. HRS participants were asked to report on their participation in lifelong learning activities such as attending an educational or training course. Participating in lifelong learning had benefits for self-reported health above and beyond the benefits of early education. It may be that later learning helps continue to build life skills that improve self-care. It also improves cognitive skills such as problem-solving and may even have psychological benefits, like a positive attitude, that may have health benefits.

Source: Yamashita and others, *Health Education Journal*, 2019



## Feeling Younger?

What does feeling younger look like 'under the skin?' HRS participants provide blood samples that helps us know the answer. Participants who say they feel younger than their actual age turn out to have healthier blood profiles. Researchers look for different biomarkers in the blood that can tell us a lot about our health. One biomarker, called C-Reactive protein, measures the amount of inflammation in the body, which can be harmful to our bodies over time. Even though inflammation is not something we can feel, those who reported feeling younger also had lower levels of this biomarker.

Source: Thyagarajan and others, *Innovation in Aging*, 2019





# Keep in Touch

## Contact Your Contact Person

As you know, at the end of your interview, we ask you to provide a name or two of a close family member or friend who we can contact if we are unable to reach you. It may be helpful to let your contact people know you have named them as a resource for us, in case we need to reach out to them. Thank you!

## Have You Moved?

Have you changed your address or phone number? Please call or write to us at the toll free number or address listed to the right. You can also e-mail us at [HRS-QandA@umich.edu](mailto:HRS-QandA@umich.edu) with any changes. Be sure to check the HRS participant website for updates as well! Visit the participant website at: <http://hrsparticipants.isr.umich.edu/>



## Contact HRS

### Toll Free

English 1-866-611-6476

Spanish 1-800-643-7605

### Mail

Health & Retirement Study  
426 Thompson St  
PO Box 1248  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1248

### Email

[HRS-QandA@umich.edu](mailto:HRS-QandA@umich.edu)

### Website

<http://hrsparticipants.isr.umich.edu>

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426 Thompson Street  
PO Box 1248  
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1248

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