

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

By Randolph M. Howes, M.D., Ph.D.

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“Is America One of the Unhealthiest Countries ?”

The World Health Organization (WHO) is used to focus attention on global health. This year, the WHO’s focus will be universal health coverage, so everyone can get the health care they need. Here is how America shapes up against the other countries of the world, as well as the factors that influenced these standings. Spain is the healthiest country in the world, and the Czech Republic, the unhealthiest. The vastly different lifestyle choices of individuals in each of these countries seem to be the deciding factors in good health vs poor health. Each year, experts at the Bloomberg Global Health Index rank 169 countries throughout the world from healthiest to unhealthiest. These rankings are based on considerations including health risks (tobacco use, high blood pressure, and obesity), availability of clean water, life expectancy, malnutrition, and causes of death. Each country is ranked accordingly, with a maximum top score of 100. Bloomberg’s top 10 Healthiest Countries in the World list for 2019 is as follows, in order of healthiest: 1. Spain, 2. Italy, 3. Iceland, 4. Japan, 5. Switzerland, 6. Sweden, 7. Australia, 8. Singapore, 9. Norway and 10. Israel. For 2019, Spain beat out last year’s winner—Italy—as the world’s healthiest country. Spain was the healthiest country in the world, with a projected life expectancy of 85.8 years by 2040, (in *The Lancet* study the United States ranked 64th). European nations comprised most of these healthiest nations, in sharp contrast to the United States, which came in at a dismal #35 on Bloomberg’s list, one place lower even than it ranked in last year’s index. According to experts, it is the Mediterranean diet that deserves most of the credit for the good health and longevity of nations like Spain and Italy. Rich in whole grains, fruits, vegetables, fish, and healthy fats—such as those found in nuts, olive oil, and avocados—the Mediterranean diet has been shown to not only reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease, hypercholesterolemia, Alzheimer’s disease, Parkinson’s disease, and cancer, but lower the risk of all-cause mortality as well. One reason is the decreased life expectancy Americans have as a whole. Factors such as suicide and drug overdoses have taken these numbers down drastically in the past few years. US life expectancies are projected to increase by only 1.1 year by 2040. This relegates the United States to the bottom five of all countries in terms of length of life expectancies. There’s the Czech Republic, which was given the dubious distinction of #1 unhealthiest country. The United States tied Lithuania for #10 of the unhealthiest countries.

In the America that I love, we know that lifestyle factors and genetics have a profound impact on general health.

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