

Is 50 the new 70?



"I gotta go before we take off," I said to my son, Michael, as I closed the bathroom door.

I was 50, at the time; he was 20.

We had checked into a St. Louis hotel prior to the Illinois-Missouri basketball game.

Cognizant of my "stream" after a recent physical, I took care of business and returned to the room minutes later, congratulating myself for my speed.

"Give me a sec', Pops," Michael said, taking his turn.

"No rush," I said, settling into a chair with a newspaper.

I heard what sounded like a water propelled pneumatic drill, a flush, and hand washing. Michael popped out of the bathroom.

"Okay, I'm good," he said.

I folded the unread paper, feigning nonchalance, but reality struck like a screaming, bold-faced headline: I'm 50, not 20.

Lately, there's been loose, whistling-past-the-graveyard talk about 50 being the new 20, 60 the new 30, 70 the new 40. Promulgated, no doubt, by 50-, 60- and 70-year-olds in full denial, hoping against hope to

stave off old age and the grim reaper.

"What about Rob Lowe?" they say. "He's in great shape."

Hey, I like Rob Lowe, but we're going to use a guy who is "too good looking" as our yardstick?

I'm not complaining. At 54 now, I enjoy good health and a great life.

"Of course," a high school buddy said, sipping the 50/20 Kool-Aid, "we're in our prime."

Overall, maybe.

But physically? Sorry, the doctor did not ask me how many times I visited the toilet at night when I was in my twenties.

Ah, the twenties. Firm jaw, wide eyes, brown hair. Work all day, play basketball and tennis for hours afterward. Stay up late and rise the next morning not yearning for a nap. Drink beer without yawning. Road trip for hours with no stops to stretch a stiff back or tight hip. Eat anything.

Today, my jaw sags, left eye narrows to a slit when I smile, and my hair is gray. After two herniated discs, no basketball or tennis. Run 3 to 4 miles, several days a week. Stretch daily due to hip impingement. Do pushups, situps. In bed by

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10:30 and awake at 6 whether I want to or not. Relish naps. Drink a cold beer after cutting the grass, but otherwise booze bloats and fatigues. Road trips are divided into three-hour segments, bathroom or stretch breaks calling. An array of pastel-colored antacid pills dot my bedside table.

"Okay, okay," my peers say, "but we're in better shape than our parents were at our age."

Some of us. My late father smoked three packs of Lucky Strikes a day, gulped gin martinis as the mood struck, and, through sheer will and obstinacy, successfully avoided exercise for 50-plus years after

being honorably discharged from the Army in 1945.

"You hike across Europe with Patton," he'd say from his La-Z-Boy, taking a drag from an ever-present Lucky, "hauling a backpack and an M1 carbine. Live without shelter, scavenge for food, freeze, sweat, all while being shot at, and then talk to me. I got all the exercise I needed."

So, yeah, I probably got him beat.

But a 2013 study appearing in JAMA Internal Medicine indicates baby boomers are less healthy than previous generations. The study spotlighted middle-aged people, 46 to 64, from 1988 to 1994 and 2007 to 2010.

From using walking-assisted devices, boomers 6.9 percent; previous generation 3.3 percent; to work-limiting disabilities, 13.8 percent to 10.1 percent; to high blood pressure, 43 percent to 36.4 percent, boomers lag. Only 13.2 percent of boomers indicated they were in excellent health versus 32 percent in the 1988-to-1994 group.

While smoking and emphysema declined, obesity rose, with 38.7 percent of boomers considered obese as opposed to 29.4 percent. Despite all the

sweat-splashing Nike commercials, workout magazines, websites and plethora of gyms, boomers exercise less. Only 35 percent of my peers exercise more than 12 times a month compared to 49 percent of the previous generation, and over half of boomers indicated they engaged in no regular physical activity compared to 17.4 percent of their predecessors.

Similarly, a study released in 2014 by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) comparing 55- to 64-year-olds in 2002 to the same cohort in 2012, revealed that obesity, diabetes, high cholesterol and high blood pressure all increased.

Thanks to advanced surgical procedures and prescription drugs, we may live longer than previous generations, but we are not healthier.

Sure, Rob Lowe looks great, but 50 the new 20? I think not. Not even for him.

But at the rate many of us are going, 50 may yet be the new 70.

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