

When you turn 100 in Japan you are sent a letter of congratulations from the Prime Minister and a commemorative silver sake cup. The cups – which serve as a thank you from the nation for your contribution to society – used to be made of sterling silver, but in 2016 had to be downgraded to a silver plated version. Why? Because the number of centenarians in the country was soaring, and the sake cups were rapidly becoming a rather expensive tradition.

The number of centenarians in Japan has topped 80,000 for the first time, with the total number of citizens aged 100-plus hitting 80,540 this month – a sharp jump of 9,176 compared to the previous year, and the 50th consecutive annual rise.

Japan's age statistics have been evolving for some time. The country is now considered a nation of "super-agers", with senior citizens aged 65 and over accounting for more than 28 per cent of its population. Meanwhile, fertility rates are decreasing. At a 2018 news conference on "Japanification," former Bank of Japan Chairman Masaaki Shirakawa concluded that measures to increase the country's GDP should take into account low fertility rates and an ageing society.

While the highest number of centenarians in the world can be found in the United States, Japan has long been home to the world's highest rate of centenarians, with a record six people aged 100 or over among every 10,000 residents. Their overall life expectancy remains one of the highest in the world, particularly among women, who account for 88 per cent of the total centenarians. It's no surprise then that the oldest woman in the world is a 117 year old Japanese woman called Kane Tanaka.

So, what is their secret? Why do Japanese people seem to have cracked the code to a long, healthy life?

Experts attribute it to myriad factors, ranging from healthy diets rich in rice and vegetables to later retirement, exercise and involvement in their community. Some research also cites the Japanese government's investment in public health in the 1950s as having bred a society that is hygiene-conscious and has embraced a healthy lifestyle.

Diet is widely accepted to be an important contributing factor. A study which came out in January this year found that eating fermented soy products - like miso, natto and tempeh - may reduce the risk of premature death. The study, published in the British Medical Journal, followed the diets and health of 92,915 Japanese men and women aged 45 to 74, for an average of 15 years. During this time, 13,303 of the study participants died. The researchers found that compared with those in the lowest one-fifth for fermented soy intake, those in the highest one-fifth had a 10 percent lower risk of death from any cause.

© ULTRA.FIt's compounded by the fact that most animal protein in the Japanese diet comes from fish, not red meat, and their intake of land and sea vegetables (including seaweed, which is packed full of health-boosting minerals, and may help to reduce blood pressure) is particularly high.

In Okinawa, in southernmost Japan, which has the highest number of centenarians in the world, the longevity of the population has been partly attributed to their traditional Japanese diet, which is low in calories and saturated fat yet high in nutrients.

Longevity could also be predetermined to a certain extent by genetics. Some studies have suggested there might be a particular gene ([DNA 5178](#)) which helps individuals resist adult-onset diseases such as myocardial infarction, cerebrovascular diseases and type 2 diabetes that is more common in Japanese people.

Experts also cite a fear of being a burden on society (a concept called *meiwaku*, or “being a nuisance”) that is imbued in Japanese people from an early age. That's perhaps why the retirement age is so late: 70 per cent of people aged 60-90 and 50 per cent of people 70 and above in Japan are either still working or volunteering.

The Japanese healthcare system is also considered to be one of the best in the world. They have a public/private hybrid model that sees the government pay for at least 70pc of the cost of procedures (more if you're on a low income). In 2015, estimated total health expenditures amounted to approximately 11 percent of GDP, despite its ageing population. Compare that to America's 17.7 per cent.

The Cabinet Office's Annual Report on the Aging Society showed a higher cognitive ability in Japanese seniors compared to the rest of the world. According to Yuko Oguma, associate professor in Health Management Research at the Keio Sports Medicine Research Center, athletic ability among older Japanese people has been linked to higher cognitive ability.

It's also worth noting that more than 80 per cent of older people in Japan (aged 65 and over) live in the house they own.

Ageing societies aren't limited to Japan, of course. They're becoming a global phenomenon. According to data collected by the United Nations' World Population Prospects: the 2019 Revision, by 2050 the number of people aged 80 and above is going to triple.

Here in the UK, according to ONS figures, the number of centenarians has increased 85pc in the past 15 years. With that in mind, perhaps we should follow Japan's lead, and hold an annual national holiday called Respect for the Aged Day, which takes place next Monday.

And maybe it's time for the Queen might to reconsider the gsm on her 100th birthday cards.