

Prevention, Life, and Longevity

Hear the historic context of how prevention was the main player in increasing the lifespan through inventions and scientific discoveries that allowed us to take care of our society, and what we need to prioritize for future progress with best-selling author and PBS host Steven Johnson.



Steven Johnson

Best-selling author and PBS host

Topics Addressed in the Episode

- What's the historical context for life expectancy and the role of modern medicine?
- Where are the biggest gaps in life expectancy today, and how do we close those gaps?

Key Highlights

On The Historic View of Life Expectancy

- “It wasn't that long ago — just 130 or 150 years ago — that for people living in a city like New York or London ran the risk of dying, or having their families die, of cholera just from drinking a glass of water. That was just par for the course in a city of a million or two million people.”
- “So you have a period where there's an economic catastrophe. Many people are out of work. They don't have access to food. But we still see this amazing decrease in mortality rates in kids because of these fights — because people were out there fighting to chlorinate the water, fighting to pasteurize the milk. Science is supporting, but so are the people. We're going to champion these ideas and get them in front of a larger audience.”
- “The story of human life expectancy is basically that at the end of the great influenza epidemic 100 years ago, in the middle of a number of mass famines around the world, life expectancy was about 35 all around the world. Today, it's somewhere around 70.”
- “In one century, we doubled the amount of time that the average human being gets to live.”
- “All three of these interventions — vaccines, pasteurization, seatbelts — these are all interventions that happen before somebody gets sick or gets hurt.” outperform you can skew benefit designed to have more of your attributed employee base using those facilities.”

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On The Gaps that Exist today Why Leaders Must Act

- “What was needed was not just a solution to the problem, but to convince people that the problem was solvable. You had to get people around to the idea that this was something that you could actually intervene in successfully.”
- “A key part of this lesson that it is as much if not more about prevention, about keeping the illness or the catastrophic, catastrophic event from happening in the first place, rather than spending all our time and our energy trying to solve the problem.”
- “At a certain point, with the invention of public health interventions but particularly with the invention of modern medicine, we start to see a gap appear. For the first time, wealthier people and wealthier countries are living longer than poor people inside those countries, or other poor countries around the world. That gap widened dramatically and probably hit its peak around 1951.”
- “We’ve spent so much of this last century working on extending that overall range of how long we live. To me, the next key phase we should be focusing on is reducing the gap by working around preventive care and implementing insurance plans.”