One Life to Live: Life Span versus Life Expectancy

*Life span* and *life expectancy* both refer to the duration of life, but the two terms have important differences.

*Life span* describes the actual number of years that an individual is alive. It can also be used to refer to the average length of time that a particular kind of organism or member of a species lives.¹

**Examples:**

The *life span* of *Drosophila melanogaster* is only about 50 days.

The investigators found that perinatal factors such as maternal behaviors and environment can affect the *life spans* of the offspring.

*Life span* can also refer to inanimate objects.¹

**Example:**

With proper maintenance and good driving habits, a car’s *life span* can be extended significantly.

*Life expectancy* is the expected duration of life as determined by statistical probability.² *Life expectancy* can vary over an individual’s lifetime depending on when it is calculated. For example, until very recently infant mortality rates were very high, so an individual’s *life expectancy* was much lower at birth than at age 20.

**Examples:**

The *life expectancy* from birth of men in 18th century France was less than 30 years.
Drug overdose is a major factor in the recent decrease in life expectancy in the United States.

References

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