

NPR's "7 Billion: How Did We Get So Big So Fast?"

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Visualizing How A Population Grows To 7 Billion (NPR Article)

The U.N. estimates that the world's population will pass the 7 billion mark on Monday. Much of that growth has happened in Asia — in India and China. Those two countries have been among the world's most populous for centuries. But a demographic shift is taking place as the countries have modernized and lowered their fertility rates. Now, the biggest growth is taking place in sub-Saharan Africa.

Due in part to that region's extreme poverty, infant mortality rates are high and access to family planning is low. The result is high birth rates and a booming population of 900 million — a number that could triple by the end of the century. Population expert Joel Cohen points out that, in 1950, there were nearly three times as many Europeans as sub-Saharan Africans. If U.N. estimates are correct, there will be nearly five sub-Saharan Africans for every European by 2100.

As NPR's Adam Cole reports, it was just over two centuries ago that the global population was 1 billion — in 1804. But better medicine and improved agriculture resulted in higher life expectancy for children, dramatically increasing the world population.

As higher standards of living and better health care are reaching more parts of the world, the rates of fertility — and population growth — have started to slow down, though the population will continue to grow for the foreseeable future.

U.N. forecasts suggest the world population could hit a peak of 10.1 billion by 2100 before beginning to decline. But exact numbers are hard to come by — just small variations in fertility rates could mean a population of 15 billion by the end of the century.

Video Transcript

A thousand years ago there were only a third of a billion people, but we were multiplying.

Now there's seven billion of us.

How did we grow so much so fast?

Say this glass is North America.

The fuller the glass gets, the more people there are.

Water drips in as people are born.

Water drips out as people die.

Okay, here's the entire world.

Now let's go back a thousand years.

The Americas are nearly empty.

Europe and Africa have less than a hundred million people between them.

And just like today, most people live in China, India and the rest of Asia.

For centuries, things stayed pretty much the same.

Births are canceled out by deaths.

Women are having lots of babies, but most babies die before they grow up and have families of their own.

We don't reach one billion until 1804.

But things are changing.

Better medicine and better agriculture are starting to slow the leak from the bottom of the glass.

People still die of course, but more babies grow up and have babies of their own – lots of babies.

We've grown from one billion to seven billion, and it only took 200 years.

Will we keep going like this?

Probably not.

The U.N. says we'll level out at ten billion by the end of the century.

So, as we continue to grow from seven billion, the question is, can the world hold that many people?

Experts can't agree.

It all depends on how well we manage our food, water and energy.