

Studies Show

Mortality after the hospitalization of a spouse. 2006 New England Journal of Medicine; 354; 7:719-30

Caring for a Sick Spouse and Your Health

What is the problem and what is known about it?

Studies show that a spouse's sickness or death can cause health problems for a partner. The effect of a spouse's sickness on the health of a partner is sometimes called "caregiver burden". Studies have focused on how and why a spouse's sickness can make the health of a partner worse. Another example is called the "bereavement (grief) effect". This is when the death of a spouse can add to the risk of death for a partner.

A better understanding of the effects that sickness can have on a patient's partner can help those in healthcare offer care and support for both the patient and the family.

Why was this study done?

This study was done to test these ideas:

- A spouse being in a hospital with a serious sickness can mean a higher risk of death for the partner. This is different from the effect that a spouse's death would have on the partner.
- The level of risk depends on what the spouse's sickness is and how hard it is to be the caregiver.
- The level of risk would change based on the amount of time that had gone by since the spouse was in the hospital.

Who was studied?

- 500,000 married couples living together in the United States.
 - They were part of Medicare in 1993.
 - They were age 68 or older.
 - They were chosen by chance.

How was the study done?

The authors looked at information from health insurance claims as reported in Medicare Provider Analysis and Review records from 1993-2002. These reports gave reasons and dates for all hospital stays. Records before 1993 gave information on any sickness that was present before the study. Finally, Vital Status File reports gave information on whether or not a spouse or the partner died during the study.

What did they find?

When the burden of caring for a sick spouse was higher, the risk to the caregiver's own health was higher. The risk is due to the physical and emotional stress of giving care for a sick spouse. The risk is also due to the loss of social, emotional, financial and practical support.

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It was also found that these effects may happen within a known time period. For example, the physical and emotional “stress effect” of caregiving may start right away. It can last for weeks or months and lessens with time. The “support effect” from less social, emotional, financial and practical support may last for many years and cause more harm over time.

What are the problems with the study?

All of the couples studied were older (age 68+). More than 90% of them were Caucasian (white). More than 5% of them were poor. Since these traits are not the same as the general make up of the population, the results of the study may not apply to the average couple in America.

Also, the authors report that those couples who both had habits that could worsen the health of both spouse and partner were not included in this study. This would include things like smoking and alcohol abuse.

Lastly, this study analyzed insurance claims and did not involve talking to patients and their families. So, it is hard to know whether or not partners even offered care to their ill spouses or felt more stress if they did.

What does the study mean?

This study shows how important it is to teach and support those who are caring for sick or injured spouses. Helping partners to know of the effect that being a caregiver for a sick spouse can have on their own health may help them to stay healthy.

For the sick spouse, efforts to lessen sickness, disability and death can help them understand that their good health can actually have benefits for loved ones. This could be a strong factor in a patient choosing to live a healthier life.

Resources

- **National Caregiver Support Program:**
www.aoa.gov/prof/aoaprogram/caregiver/caregiver.asp, 202 619-0724