

Marriage provides health benefits—and here's why

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The new year is traditionally a time when many people feel a renewed commitment to create healthy habits, such as exercising regularly, drinking more water or eating more healthfully.

It turns out that when it comes to health, married people have an edge, especially married men. But surely the act of walking down the aisle is not what provides this health advantage.

So what exactly is at play?

As a team, we study how relationships affect health. One of us is a [nursing professor](#) who studies how social support influences health behaviors. One is a [social health psychologist](#) who explores how stress affects couples' relationships and health, and one is a [social psychologist](#) who researches how relationships influence health behavior changes. Together, we examine how partners influence each other's health, taking gender into account in this equation.

Health benefits of marriage, for men and women

It's important to note that most marriage and [health studies](#) have been limited to married men and women. But more recent studies are examining these relationships in partners who have the same [gender identity](#), the same biological sex and who are gender diverse.

One theory that seeks to explain the link between marriage and health is the [act of self-selection](#). Simply put, people who are wealthier and healthier than average are more likely not only to get married but also to find a partner who is wealthier and healthier than average. Men and women with poorer health and wealth than average [are less likely](#) to marry at all.

While this may be part of the story, marriage also provides partners [with a sense of belonging](#), more opportunities for [social engagement](#) and reduced feelings of loneliness. [This social integration](#), or the extent to which people participate in [social relationships](#) and activities, can greatly influence health—from [reducing the risk of hypertension](#) and [heart](#)

[disease](#) to [lowering one's risk of death](#) or [suicide](#).

Another important connection between marriage and health involves the body's inflammatory process. Research links [loneliness and lack of close relationships](#) with inflammation, or the body's way of reacting to illness, injury or disease. Though inflammation is needed for healing, chronic inflammation is associated with [heart disease, arthritis, cancers](#) and [autoimmune diseases](#). While single adults undoubtedly have very meaningful close relationships too, a healthy marriage by nature provides more opportunities for closeness and socialization, [supporting the link between marriage and inflammation](#).

When you dig deeper, gender seems to play a role as well. One study related to [marital quality, gender and inflammation](#) found a connection between lower levels of spousal support and higher levels of inflammation for women, but not men. In another study, if couples used negative communication patterns, such as one partner making demands while the other partner withdraws, [women but not men experienced heightened inflammation](#).

Marriage and longevity

Married men and married women live, on average, [two years longer than their unmarried counterparts](#). One reason for this longevity benefit is the [influence of marital partners on healthy behaviors](#). Study after study shows that married people [eat better and are less likely to smoke and drink excessively](#). All of these healthy behaviors help explain why [married people](#) tend to live longer. However, men married to women tend to see [additional longevity benefits than women married to men](#), for several possible reasons.

For example, female spouses may be looking out for their male partners, [reinforcing healthy behaviors](#) and providing more opportunities for

healthy choices. On the flip side, married men are [less likely to attempt to influence](#) their wives' health behaviors.

Women tend to [take the lead in promoting healthy behaviors](#), benefiting their husbands. Data suggests that men and women in same-gender relationships [tend to engage in teamwork](#) to mutually promote positive health behaviors. Further, married men and women are [more likely to want to change their partners' health behaviors](#), such as exercise, especially if the spouses' habits are worse than their own. These findings suggest that both the person and the partner's gender matter.

[Relationship quality](#) can also influence health behaviors. For example, in the context of exercise, both men and women who reported higher levels of marital support [were more likely to walk for exercise](#). However, as men aged, the association between marital support and walking [became even stronger for them](#), but the same was not true for married women.

Cultural norms and caregiving

To further understand how men's health benefits from their wives, consider [cultural norms](#) that foster expectations that women will be the [primary caretaker in committed relationships](#).

Middle-aged people, and in particular women, have also been described as the "[sandwich generation](#)," since they are often "sandwiched" between taking care of growing children and aging parents. Caregiving can take a [toll on the immune system and one's overall health](#). Additionally, [invisible labor related to child care](#) and household duties, which often disproportionately fall to women, can leave women with less time for self-care, [such as being physically active](#).

[Women also take on more responsibilities](#) in terms of coordinating doctors' appointments and promoting adherence to medical advice for

their husbands than husbands do for their wives. However, [men often increase their time spent caregiving](#) when their wives are ill.

Of course, not all marriages are created equal

[Relationship quality](#) and [relationship conflict](#) also play important roles when it comes to marriage and health. Gendered socialization and power differences often lead to women's thinking and [caring about their relationships more than men](#), causing women to take primary responsibility for managing [relationship](#) issues, while men take on less of the burden.

Research shows that [women](#) are also more likely to [base their identities on their relationships](#), and so when they experience marital conflict or other relationship issues, they experience more negative [emotional and physical health](#) effects than men. This can include increased risk of [metabolic syndrome](#), [inflammation](#) and [cardiovascular disease](#).

Does this mean that all men should get married to protect their health or that unmarried people can't enjoy the same health benefits as those who have said "I do"?

Not at all. Unmarried people can, of course, enjoy [good health](#) and longevity. Creating and [maintaining strong social ties](#) and [engaging with one's community](#) go a long way when it comes to health. Further, making the best lifestyle choices available, seeking preventive [health](#) care and reducing stress can help everyone live a longer, healthier life.

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