

Spouses often mirror each other's health habits

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If one spouse exercises, quits smoking, stops drinking alcohol, receives a flu shot, or undergoes a cholesterol screening, the other spouse is more likely to do the same, according to a new study in Health Services Research.

“We found that when one spouse improves his or her health behavior, the other spouse was likely to do so as well,” said co-author Jody Sindelar, health economist and public health professor in the Yale School of Public Health. “This was consistent across all the behaviors analyzed and was similar among both males and females.”

Using longitudinal data on 6,072 individuals and their spouses from the Health and Retirement Study, the researchers found the changes in spouses’ health habits were most apparent in such behavior as smoking and drinking, which is often spurred by outside cues, and in patient-directed preventive behavior, such as getting a flu shot.

For example, smokers were more than five times more likely to quit smoking if their spouse quit, when controlling for other relevant factors. Similarly, spouses were five times more likely to quit drinking alcohol if their partner didn’t drink. The changes were less apparent in clinician-directed preventive behavior, such as obtaining cholesterol screening.

Sindelar and co-author Tracy Falba, M.D., visiting assistant professor at Duke University's Center for Health Policy, Law and Management, said health habits and use of preventive services should be viewed in the

context of a family. They said attempts to change behavior may be enhanced, or thwarted, by the behavior of family members, especially spouses. For this reason, they said, intervention programs should include tips about how to get the other spouse involved in exercise or help reduce tobacco cues.

Source: Yale University

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