

Divorce undermines health in ways remarriage doesn't heal

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Divorce and widowhood have a lingering, detrimental impact on health, even after a person remarries, research at the University of Chicago and Johns Hopkins University shows.

"Among the currently married, those who have ever been divorced show worse health on all dimensions. Both the divorced and widowed who do not remarry show worse health on all dimensions," said University of Chicago sociologist Linda Waite and co-author of a new study on marriage and health.

Waite, the Lucy Flower Professor in Sociology and Director of the Center on Aging at the National Opinion Research Center at the University, conducted the study with Mary Elizabeth Hughes, Assistant Professor at Johns Hopkins' Bloomberg School of Public Health. Their research will be published in the September issue of the Journal of Health and Social Behavior in the article, "Marital Biography and Health Midlife," which was based on a study of 8,652 people aged 51 to 61.

Although a number of studies have looked at the connection between health and marriage, theirs is the first to examine both marital transitions and marital status on a wide range of health dimensions.

Based on genetics and other factors, people enter adulthood with a particular "stock" of health, other research has shown. "Each person's experience of marital gain and loss affect this stock of health," Waite said. "For example, the transition to marriage tends to bring an immediate health benefit, in that it improves health behaviors for men and financial well-being for women."

These advantages are enhanced throughout marriage. Divorce or widowhood undermines health because incomes drop, and stress develops over issues such as shared child care.

Among the findings:

- Divorced or widowed people have 20 percent more chronic health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes or cancer than married people. They also have 23 percent more mobility limitations, such as trouble climbing stairs or walking a block.
- People who never married have 12 percent more mobility limitations and 13 percent more depressive symptoms, but report no difference in the number of chronic health conditions from married people.
- [People](#) who remarried have 12 percent more chronic conditions and 19 percent more mobility limitations, but no more depressive symptoms, than those who are continuously married.

The impacts of [marriage](#), divorce and remarriage on health are based on the ways in which the various illnesses develop and heal, Waite said.

"Some health situations, like depression, seem to respond both quickly and strongly to changes in current conditions," she said. "In contrast, conditions such as diabetes and heart disease develop slowly over a substantial period and show the impact of past experiences, which is why health is undermined by [divorce](#) or widowhood, even when a person remarries."

Source: University of Chicago ([news](#) : [web](#))

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