

Spouses of dementia sufferers have a 6-fold increased risk of dementia onset

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Older married adults whose spouse has dementia are at significantly higher risk for developing dementia themselves, compared to similar older married adults whose spouse never develops dementia. This is the key finding of a study published today in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*.

Informal [dementia caregiving](#) for a spouse is a natural marital obligation, and spousal caregivers often report positive feelings toward caregiving, yet it is difficult, requiring time, energy and usually physical exertion. Dementia caregivers have been shown to provide more assistance, and to report more personal sacrifices and stress, than those who care for physically-impaired elderly without dementia. While there are many published studies showing that dementia caregivers are at higher risk for health problems and depression, none have examined risk for dementia in the caregiver.

2,442 subjects (1,221 [married couples](#)) aged 65 and older from Northern Utah, USA, without dementia at onset were studied for up to 12 years to monitor for onset of dementia in husbands, wives or both. During this time, 125 cases of dementia only in the husband were diagnosed, 70 only in the wife, and 30 where both spouses were diagnosed (60 people).

The researchers, led by Dr. Maria Norton of Utah State University, USA, adjusted for socioeconomic status, a significant predictor of many health-related outcomes including dementia to control for shared environmental exposures that might influence risk for dementia in both

spouses.

The results showed that incident dementia was significantly associated with older age, and having a spouse with dementia. Participants with a spouse who developed dementia were at a six times increased risk of developing dementia, net of the effect of age, gender, APOE [genotype](#), and [socioeconomic status](#), with higher risk in men (11.9) than women (3.7).

"Future studies are needed to determine how much of this association is due to caregiver stress compared to a shared environment," said Norton. "On the positive side, the majority of these individuals, with spouses who develop dementia, did not themselves develop dementia, therefore more research is needed to explore which factors distinguish those who are more vulnerable."

"Given the significant public health concern of Alzheimer's disease and other dementias, and the upcoming shift in population age composition, continued research into the causes of dementia is urgent," concluded Norton.

Provided by Wiley

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