

# Marriage, but not cohabitation, pays health dividends—for him

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Photo: Robin Foster

Commitment to lifelong relationship appears to be key, study says.

(HealthDay)—Guys, a loving spouse may save your life, U.S. health officials say. But living with a significant other doesn't appear to confer the same health benefits as marriage.

Single and married [men](#) are more likely to see a doctor regularly than those living with a partner out of wedlock, according to a new U.S. National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) study.

And compared to husbands or other single men, cohabiting men are also the least likely to report having undergone preventive screenings such as cholesterol and blood pressure tests in the previous year, the researchers said.

"Cohabiting men are a group particularly at risk of not receiving clinical preventive services recommended by the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force," according to the *NCHS Data Brief* published June 11 by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The findings held true for younger and older males, the study authors noted.

It's not clear why this is so. "That was completely unexpected, and I don't have an explanation for it," said study lead author Stephen Blumberg, an associate director with the NCHS division of health interview statistics.

"But it does serve notice to the girlfriends and partners of these men that they could take a more active role in health care decisions and talk to them about getting healthy," Blumberg said.

How intimate relationships affect men's health has been studied before. Plenty of research shows that people with spouses or committed partners—especially men—take better care of their health and have healthier lifestyles, said Timothy Smith, a professor of psychology at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City.

The key seems to be the commitment to a lifelong relationship, said Linda Waite, a professor of urban sociology at the University of Chicago. Spouses look out for each other not just because of mutual affection but also because they're important to each other's futures, she said.

Also, "people take better care of their own health because it's important to their partner," Waite said.

And many wives handle doctor appointments for their husbands and oversee other health matters such as medical tests, she added.

But Smith cautioned that bad relationships aren't healthy. "Strain and disruption in [intimate relationships](#) is associated with poor health outcomes," he said.

As for the effect of relationships on women's [health](#), it seems females are less reliant on men to keep them on a healthy path, Waite said.

Single women, in particular, "have other sources of support they can turn to like their mother, sister or their friends. Men are less likely to have those sources of support," Waite said.

For the new study, researchers examined data from a 2011-2012 U.S. survey and focused on three groups of 18- to 64-year-old men—married men living with a spouse, men who live with a partner of either gender, and single men.

Overall, about 71 percent said they'd been to the doctor at least once during the past year. For married men, the number was 76 percent, the study found. It fell to 65 percent for single men and 60 percent for men who lived with a partner.

When insurance was taken into account, about 82 percent of insured [married men](#) had seen a doctor within the past 12 months versus three-quarters of single men and 71 percent of cohabiting men, the researchers found.

Only about 50 percent of cohabiting men had undergone recommended cholesterol and diabetes screenings in the past 12 months, the study found.

"Men should be seeing a doctor in order to learn if they're still healthy and, if not, catch problems early on," Blumberg said.

The study findings don't prove there's a connection between marriage—or bachelorhood—and visits to the doctor. The research also doesn't show whether the men who went to the doctor more often are actually healthier.

"Ultimately, the data we have available don't tell us that life will be better down the line," Blumberg said.

Waite suggested that unmarried men try to "figure out a way to replace the kinds of support that they might get from a spouse if they were married."

**More information:** The U.S. National Library of Medicine has more about [men's health](#).

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