

# Family members play important role in managing chronic illness

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Family members often play an important role in managing chronic illnesses, and a family approach may produce more effective, long-term benefits for the patient, according to a Penn State researcher.

Lynn Martire, professor of human development and [family](#) studies at Penn State and affiliate of the Center for Healthy Aging, says family intervention approaches—such as working together to make dietary changes—can be an effective strategy for improving [chronic illness](#) management.

"For some family groups, setting goals together for making lifestyle changes such as healthier eating habits and regular exercise, helps patients to stay on track and may benefit family members as well," she said.

Martire said this approach could have positive implications on health care costs as well as the treatment of patients.

"The vast majority of [health care spending](#) is for treatment of [chronic health problems](#) in children and adults. Self-management of chronic illness can reduce these health care costs, and close family members such as a parent or the spouse play an important role in helping patients to manage their illness," Martire said. "Therefore, psychological or behavioral treatments that target the patient-family member dyad may decrease [health care costs](#) or have more long-lasting effects than treatments that target only the patient."

Martire is co-author of "Close Relationships and the Management of Chronic Illness: Associations and Interventions," a paper that appears in the September issue of *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, a journal published by the American Psychological Association. Vicki Helgeson, professor of psychology at Carnegie Mellon University, is co-author of the paper.

According to the authors, patients and family members can work together to monitor patients' illness symptoms, keep medical appointments, and help the patient stick to medication regimens as a strategy for chronic illness management. "A key feature of these programs is improving communication around health issues and identifying obstacles to good self-management," Martire said.

The use of technology to maintain behavior change may also be a promising approach, Martire said. Some treatment programs require frequent travel on the part of patients and families, which limits their accessibility. Technology-supported approaches such as web- or mobile phone-based programs could reach a broader population of patients and family members.

Increasing internet usage across broad segments of the U.S. population offers an especially appealing method for delivering programs to large numbers of patients and families at low cost. Moreover, web-based interventions for health and illness management could be modified for dyads, she said.

"There is certainly more to learn about the influence of family on patient illness management," Martire said. "However, it is not too soon to develop theory-based interventions that aim to change specific health-related behaviors of [family members](#) to see if [patients'](#) illness management improves."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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