

**Richard A. Courtney, CELA**  
**Certified Elder Law Attorney**  
**4400 Old Canton Road, Suite 220**  
**Jackson, Mississippi 39211**  
**601-987-3000 or 1-866-ELDERLAW**  
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## **Caregiving May Lengthen Life**

**Taking care of a spouse decreases risk of death, study finds**

**By Serena Gordon**

*HealthDay Reporter* HealthDay.com

Much has been reported about the stress and burden of caregiving, but a new study suggests there may be a flip side to taking care of someone you love as they age -- a decreased risk of death.

"We found that caregivers who spent an average of 14 or more hours a week caregiving lived longer and reduced their risk of dying by about half," said study author Stephanie Brown, an assistant professor in internal medicine at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. She added that even after they controlled the data to account for things such as age or previous illness, "there was about a 36 percent reduced risk of dying in the seven-year time period."

Results of the study were published in the current issue of *Psychological Science*. The study included 1,688 couples who lived on their own, not in assisted living or a nursing home. All of the study participants were over 70.

The researchers gathered health and demographic information as well as information on how much each spouse helped the other with normal activities of daily living, such as eating, dressing, managing money and taking medications.

Eighty-one percent received no help at all with their daily tasks, while 9 percent said they received less than 14 hours a week of help from their spouse. Ten percent reported receiving more than 14 hours a week of help from their spouse.

Over the seven-year study, 27 percent of the study volunteers died.

When the researchers analyzed the data and controlled for factors such as age, race, gender, education level and net worth, they found that providing care for your spouse for more than 14 hours a week was associated with a significantly decreased risk of death compared to those who provided no spousal caregiving.

"Other studies caution against caregiving, but our study suggests that the actual act of caretaking may not be harmful," said Brown.

"This study shows that the burden of caregiving can sometimes be lightly born," said Dr. Gary Kennedy, director of geriatric psychiatry at Montefiore Medical Center in New York City. But, he said that the results might be different depending on the type of care a spouse has to provide. Taking care of someone with early-stage Alzheimer's disease, who can still function fairly well and still behaves normally for the most part is much different from taking care of someone in the middle stages of the disease, who may be aggressive or may not sleep well.

Brown believes that the decreased risk of death comes from physiological benefits from caregiving instead of psychological ones. The authors suggest that stress regulation may play a role in this benefit. Helping others is associated with a release of oxytocin, a hormone that may help buffer the effects of stress, Brown explained. Kennedy said the survival benefit is likely caused by both physiological and psychological factors.

"We know that in rat pups that are prematurely weaned, their heart rate plummets, even before they've lost body temperature, so it's not related to cooling or caloric problems at that point. Simply being separated changes the heart rate. Social interactions have a biological impact," he explained. Plus, he said, having a partner to care for provides structure and a sense of purpose.

Learn more about controlling caregiver stress from the [National Women's Health Information Center](#).

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SOURCES: Stephanie Brown, Ph.D., assistant professor, internal medicine, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and researcher, VA Ann Arbor Healthcare System; Gary Kennedy, M.D., director, geriatric psychiatry, Montefiore Medical Center, New York City; 2008 *Psychological Science*.