

The Effect of Hospitalization on Older Couples¹

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Very often the tale is told of an elderly couple for whom the loss of one spouse is more than the other can bear—and the other partner dies relatively soon thereafter. Referred to as the bereavement effect, this phenomenon has been well studied and documented. Likewise, research has explored the weighty effect that a spouse's illness has on the caregiving partner, also called caregiver burden. Studies have shown that declines in physical and mental health of a spouse are often linked to a decrease in their partner's health.

While we might romanticize that these couples suffer or die from a “broken heart,” new research reported in *The New England Journal of Medicine* has revealed a number of factors that may have serious consequences for spouses who are widowed or caregiving. For example, researchers have discovered the type of illness can have a significant impact. Additionally, spousal illness or death may deprive a partner of emotional, economic, social, and other practical support. Lack of support and related stress can also adversely affect a surviving or caregiving spouse's immune system, placing them at higher risk. Finally, the widowed spouse may begin to exhibit harmful behaviors such as drinking, poor eating habits, or high-risk activities after the illness or loss of a loved one.

Better understanding the potential problems elderly couples face when one spouse becomes ill or hospitalized can help families, healthcare providers, and policy makers better prepare to help them.

1. This document is FAR3034, one of a series of the Family Youth and Community Sciences Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Broadcast as program 395 in January 2007. Published on EDIS August 2012. In the interest of time and/or clarity, the broadcast version of this script may have been modified. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.
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Reference

Christakis, Nicholas A., Allison, Paul D. (2006) Mortality after the Hospitalization of a Spouse, *The New England Journal of Medicine*, Volume 354:719-730, February 16, 2006, Number 7.