

Happy marriage may do a woman's heart good

Wedded bliss may provide women some protection against heart disease and stroke, new study findings suggest.

The study, which followed 413 middle-aged women over a dozen years, found that those who were happy in their marriages were less likely than their dissatisfied peers to develop metabolic syndrome. Metabolic syndrome is a cluster of disorders -- high blood pressure, excess abdominal fat, abnormal cholesterol levels and elevated blood sugar -- that raises the risk of diabetes, heart disease and stroke.

Some research has suggested that psychological stress can contribute to metabolic syndrome, and the authors of the new study theorized that a happy marriage -- perhaps by acting as a "buffer" against stress -- might be related to a reduced risk.

In support of their theory, women who were deemed "maritally dissatisfied" based on a standard questionnaire were three times more likely to develop metabolic syndrome during the study period than women who were content in their marriages. The risk was also higher among women who were divorced or widowed.

Single women, on the other hand, showed no significant difference from happily married women. The elevated risks remained when the researchers controlled for other factors, such as age, race, education, smoking and exercise. And no psychological factor -- namely, depression, anxiety or a woman's feelings of support from family and friends -- explained the connection between marriage quality and metabolic syndrome.

A number of studies have found that married men are at lower risk of cardiovascular disease than bachelors, but the evidence for such benefits in women has been less consistent. In addition, simply being married is not necessarily a health boon, as research has linked spousal discord to poorer health.

Vocabulary

abdominal(ab)normal

anxiety

bliss

boon

buffer

cardiovascular

chronic

cluster

deem(ed)

depression

diabetes

(dis)harmony

(dis)order

(dis)satisfied

elevate(d)

metabolic

(pre)doctoral

spur

stroke

theorize(d)

widow(ed)

Comprehension Questions

1. Do you agree that married women (or men) have fewer health risks than single people?
2. Why do you suppose there is a connection between marital happiness and health?
3. Could an unhappy marriage lead to health problems? Why or why not?
4. Do you think that living with (but not being married to) a partner can produce the same health benefits? Why or why not?
5. What are the health benefits and/or risks of having children?
6. What are the advantages/disadvantages of remaining single?
7. Does health necessarily decline as a result of being divorced or widowed?

For Additional Practice:

- Who do you think is better off in terms of health, wealth, happiness?