

In Sickness and in Health

Do couples who stay together get sick together? Not necessarily | By Lindsey Wahowiak



If your partner has type 2 diabetes, does that mean you'll develop it, too? That's the question researchers tried to answer in a study from McGill University in Canada. The study, published in the January 2014 issue of *BMC Medicine*, found a correlation: The spouses of people with type 2 diabetes are 26 percent more likely than spouses of people without diabetes to also develop type 2.

Is that because partners might cultivate unhealthy eating habits and skip exercise, which can lead to an increased risk of developing type 2 diabetes? Or is it that once you know more about diabetes

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(maybe through being the caregiver or loved one of someone with the condition), you are more likely to see the symptoms of diabetes in yourself? The study didn't say. But it's clear that as a caregiver, it's vitally important that you take care of your own health in addition to looking after your loved one with diabetes. Here are steps you can take to make sure your partnership is healthy and so are you.

- **Learn about diabetes.** This might seem like a no-brainer, but understanding what your partner is going through is important in two ways: It makes you more present in your partner's life, and it helps you both feel confident in case of an emergency. Eliot LeBow, MSW, LCSW, CDE, is a New York therapist and a person with type 1 diabetes, so he's had firsthand experience involving partners in his diabetes. When he tests his blood glucose, he shares his meter reading with his loved one, for example. "My present girlfriend, she takes an active role in my diabetes, and I think that's really important," he says. So ask questions and learn how to give glucagon. (It's an injectable hormone used when an episode of low blood glucose is so severe, perhaps resulting in unconsciousness, that the person can't eat or drink glucose.) Your knowledge and skills show your partner that you care.

- **Communicate openly and regularly.** You can't ignore diabetes, but you can't make it your entire relationship, either. There has to be a mutual plan that addresses needs of both partners, LeBow says, adding: "If a couple pretends it doesn't exist, diabetes is such a chronic illness that it will tear the relationship apart." Linda Bloom, MSW, LCSW, coauthor with her husband, Charlie Bloom, MSW, of the book *Secrets of Great Marriages*, says sharing thoughts and feelings is actually part of compassionate self-care. "If you go down the road of the sacrificial martyr, you end up cranky, burnt out, and more likely to develop illness yourself," she says. Bloom suggests a motto of "Let's play team" for healthy relationships: When one person

thrives, the other is able to as well. But people can thrive only if they share their needs—and work together to meet them.

- **Make healthy changes together.**

Diabetes Forecast Reader Panel member Eric Holzman, 51, of Ellicott City, Md., has type 1 diabetes. He generally eats a lower-carb diet. His wife, Ingrid, does not have diabetes, but she can't eat gluten or pork. What's a healthy couple to do? They make meals that both can eat together. "I cook on weekends, usually prepare enough extra food to last several days, and my wife cooks the remainder of the week," Holzman says. Dining together in a way that benefits both partners' health is a recipe for success that everyone can enjoy.

- **Cultivate your relationship.** Some research shows that an intimate relationship can bolster your health. And having a net of social support is extremely important to your health, says Bloom. "A lot of studies coming out now [show] people in happy marriages have less suicides, less mental health issues [than those who are not]," Bloom says. "I can't help but believe that some of the same exact things are true for people ... with diabetes. Their lives are going to be healthier, and they're going to live longer if they have that dependable web of intimacy."

Reader Panel member Mary Pruiett of Chapel Hill, N.C., finds that to be true. She's part of the Joslin 50-Year Medalist Study, having lived with diabetes for 60 years. She's been married to her husband, Ralph, who does not have diabetes, for nearly 44 years. He's been her support system since the time before blood glucose meters. "One of the things [Joslin has] observed is the importance of having positive emotional support in order to live well with diabetes," she says. "I think it is critical. You can and should be the 'expert' in taking care of yourself, but others who are close to you can make that easier and more rewarding."

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—Eliot LeBow, MSW, LCSW, CDE

Want to get healthy as a couple? Start exercising together! Walks are a great way to relax and get fit. diabetes.org/stepout

