A new study by a Brigham Young University professor shows a strong association between the health of people and the health of their spouses.

“It turns out that the health of your spouse is as strong an indicator for your own health as your economic status—two proven health indicators,” says Sven Wilson, an assistant professor of political science who specializes in health economics and demography. His study is reported in the September 2002 issue of the Social Science and Medicine Journal.

“When addressing health issues, physicians and policy makers should remember the patients involved will often have spouses likewise struggling with their health,” Wilson says. “Consequently, many health policies should be focused on families, not just individuals.” He also said that individuals who have an ill spouse may want to reevaluate their financial plans, since a partner’s condition may be an indicator of their own undetected health problems.

Previous research has established that married individuals are collectively healthier than singles. In this study, Wilson wanted to test his notion that individuals within marriages would often mirror one another’s health. He obtained lifestyle and demographic information gathered from more than 4,700 couples in their 50s from the Health and Retirement Study, a 1992 nationwide survey. He then used statistical models to test how much the subjects’ traits influenced their overall health, as measured by three different diagnostic tools.

Wilson found strong evidence for a correlation in spouses’ health. For instance, a man in his early 50s who is in excellent health has about a 5 percent chance of having a wife in fair health and a 2 percent chance of being married to a woman in poor health. But a man in poor health has 24 percent chance of being married to a woman in fair health and a 12 percent chance of being married to a woman in poor health.

Wilson says several factors explain much of the correlation he found. “We know that people tend to choose spouses with similar backgrounds, and we also know that level of education and economic status are proven indicators of health status,” Wilson said. “So if people with the same health-related characteristics are marrying each other, it stands to reason they would have similar health.”

Wilson also found that couples tend to make similar choices after they are married that will affect their health, such as how much to smoke, drink, or what foods to eat.

He also suspects other causes for the correlation he found between spouses’ health—factors that were not observable in the data he studied.

“Spouses obviously share environmental risks—they breathe the same air and are exposed to the same germs.” Wilson said. “Another factor at work is that spouses share many of the same emotional stresses, such as problems with children. There is also the burden of being a caregiver for a spouse in poor health, which may take a significant toll on the caregiving spouse.”

Because of the propensity for shared illness, Wilson emphasizes the need for the national healthcare debate to acknowledge the importance of examining solutions at the household level, rather than the individual level.

“When spouses find themselves both in poor health, they each lack the support a healthy spouse would provide and both face the additional stress of dealing with the sick loved one,” Wilson said. “In these cases, two sick spouses add up to a serious drain on the financial and other resources of the family and the public.”

--Michael Smart

Since its inception in December 1999, Marriage & Families has been sent to tens of thousands of interested readers throughout the United States and Canada. Published by the BYU School of Family Life, Marriage & Families disseminates scholarly-based material in support of families and family values. Its audience includes educators and researchers; government and religious leaders; mental health practitioners; as well as husbands, wives, and parents.

By design, Marriage & Families is a free publication, available to anyone wishing to receive a subscription. And that will continue to be the case. At the same time, as many readers have recognized the value of this unique magazine and have indicated an interest in providing financial support for the magazine. To accommodate those wishing to support the magazine, the School of Family Life has decided— in conjunction with its ongoing fund-raising efforts— to begin raising an endowment, thus ensuring Marriage & Families’ continued influence and viability.

Those wishing to provide one-time or ongoing support for the magazine are invited to send their tax-deductible contributions to:

School of Family Life
Brigham Young University
380 SWKT
Provo, UT 84602

Checks should be made out to School of Family Life, indicating that the donation is for Marriage & Families magazine.