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In Sickness and in Health

Partner's medical condition affects our own.

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It definitely has its delights, but falling in love shakes up your life quite a bit. Devoting yourself to a partner includes taking on new friends, new relatives, and a new living arrangement. Pairing up also sparks sweet dreams about the goals you'd like to reach, trips you want to take together, and the kids you hope to have.

Likely, the last thing on your mind is how your beloved will tweak your cholesterol levels. Yet, a large body of research shows that relationships steer our physical well-being as well as our emotional health. A romantic partner often has more influence on our behaviors than anyone else. Exactly how he or she affects our health is sometimes common sense (if not obvious) and sometimes as mysterious as love itself.

We tend to hook up with people like us. "Everyone says opposites attract, but opposites don't stay together for that long," says Deanna Meyler, who co-authored a review of research on the tendency of partners' health habits and statuses to merge, a phenomenon known as health concordance. Sustained relationships tend to occur among people who have comparable backgrounds, attitudes, and behaviors--qualities that often find their way into one's physical condition.

Lifestyle like-mindedness is part of what drew Kelly McMasters, 32, to her now-husband, Mark Milroy, 40, back in October of 2000. She's a writer. He's a painter. When they met, both were self-employed. Both smoked.

"A lot of our early courtship was going out to bars and diners," says Kelly. "We drank lots of coffee and ate lots of cheese. We didn't worry about it because we weren't seeing the effects on the outside. Little did we know what it was doing to our blood."

When two people marry, their habits become even more alike. A study of newlyweds found that each individual's health behaviors before marriage affected those same behaviors in their partner in the years after the wedding. Eating isn't the only ritual that synchs up. Researchers have found that spouses influence each others' exercise habits, doctor visits, and use of alcohol, cigarettes, and marijuana.

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Soul mates can even develop the same afflictions over time--a condition in one spouse often places the other at increased risk for the same disorder. This may be true for cancer, stroke, arthritis, hypertension, asthma, depression, and peptic ulcer disease. One study shows that a person's hypertension risk doubles when their spouse is diagnosed as hypertensive.

That's probably because commitment typically leads to shared meals, activity patterns, financial resources, and social networks. Couples may also find themselves true partners in health by means of social control, in which one spouse tries to keep the other wholesome, and mood contagion, where one partner's anxiety washes over the other and even takes a toll on his or her body: Men whose wives are upset by their work are nearly three times more likely to develop heart disease.

"Individuals don't live in a vacuum," says Gregory Homish, an epidemiologist at the State University of New York at Buffalo, who conducted the newlywed study. "Everyone who's in a relationship should be aware that they're making some physically relevant decisions based on their partner's influence," he says. Our doctors should be noting it, too. "They'll ask about your family history, but not about your spouse," Homish says. As a result, they might end up missing obvious risk factors for disease.

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