

Study: Spouse's death risk rises when other is ill

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

CHICAGO — Highlighting the deep bonds between long-time husbands and wives, new research suggests that when an older person falls seriously ill, his or her spouse faces a heightened risk of death.

"We showed that you can die of a broken heart not just when your partner dies, but also when your partner falls ill," said Harvard Medical School's Dr. Nicholas Christakis, lead

author of the study.

The study, published today in the New England Journal of Medicine, followed more than 518,000 elderly couples for nine years. It found the risk of death rose nearly 5 percent for a husband whose wife was hospitalized — a marker for the onset of serious illness — and nearly 3 percent for a wife whose husband took ill.

The risk of a husband or wife dying increased if the sick spouse became severely

disabled. A woman whose husband was hospitalized with dementia was 28 percent more likely to die than if her husband had remained healthy; for congestive heart failure, the figure was 15 percent.

Though it has long been known that widows or widowers often die soon after their spouse passes away, Christakis' research is the first to look at the impact of serious illness on spouses' deaths.

The study found that medical

risks to a spouse appear to be highest immediately after a crisis. Stress appears to be a major factor in the causes of death, which include heart attacks, accidents, infections and suicide, Christakis said.

Years after the onset of a serious illness, the spouse remains at a smaller but still elevated risk of dying. Increased social isolation, the long-term burden of caregiving and personal neglect may be factors, Christakis speculated.