

RESEARCH NEWS

Partners can help each other make positive health behaviour changes, study says

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Both men and women are more likely to make a positive health change, such as stopping smoking or taking up exercise, if their partner does too, research published in *JAMA Internal Medicine* has shown.

Analysis of data from the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing, a large population based cohort of 3722 married or cohabiting couples over the age of 50, showed that people whose partners changed their behaviour to become healthier were significantly more likely to improve their own behaviour than those with a partner who was always healthy.¹

Over the four year study period 17% of smokers quit smoking, 44% of inactive people became physically active, and 15% of overweight people lost at least 5% of their baseline bodyweight.

Half of the women in the study who smoked were able to quit if their partner gave up smoking at the same time, compared with 17% of women whose partners were already non-smokers and 8% of those whose partners were regular smokers. For men, 48% stopped smoking if their partner did at the same time compared with 8% of those whose partner continued to smoke.

For physical activity, 67% of men and 66% of women became physically active if their partner did too, compared with 26% and 24%, respectively, of those whose partner stayed inactive. And for weight loss 26% of men and 36% of women lost at least 5% of their bodyweight if their partner also did, compared with 10% and 15% of those whose partner did not lose weight.

The study has a number of limitations. Although weight status was objectively measured it relied on self reports of smoking and physical activity. And because changes were analysed over several years any short lived changes would have been missed.

The researchers from University College London concluded that the findings had implications for the design and delivery of interventions. "Given that partners have a mutual influence on one another's behaviour, behaviour change interventions could be more effective if they targeted couples as opposed to individuals," they said.



1 Jackson S, Steptoe A, Wardle J. The influence of partner's behavior on health behavior change: The English Longitudinal Study of Ageing. *JAMA Intern Med* 19 Jan 2015, doi: 10.1001/jamainternmed.2014.7554.

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