

In the news

TO HAVE AND TO HOLD

A recent study published in the *Journal of Clinical Oncology* has indicated that married cancer patients fare better than singletons. But is the underlying issue more one of support than actual marriage?

The study looked at the medical records of more than 700,000 cancer patients in the United States and after correcting for confounding factors found that married patients were more likely to survive their disease than never-married, divorced, separated or widowed patients. Married patients were also more likely to be diagnosed with less advanced disease. “Our data suggest that marriage can have a significant health impact for patients with cancer. This was consistent for every cancer [type] that we reviewed”, stated Ayal Aizer from the Harvard Radiation Oncology Program, USA, and the first author of the study ([Medscape](#), 24 Sep 2013).

There was a 20% reduction in deaths of patients who were married compared with unmarried patients, a finding that the lead author of the study Paul Nguyen described as “pretty astonishing” adding that “there’s something about the social support that you get within a marriage that leads to better survival” ([thechart](#), 23 Sep 2013).

Although this study finds a strong association between marital status and cancer outcome, it does not show that marriage directly causes better survival. Indeed, “marital status could be a proxy for social support”, commented Kevin Stein from the American Cancer Society, who was not involved in the study ([Boston.com](#), 24 Sep 2013). “We suspect that social support from spouses is what’s driving the striking improvement in survival”, stated Aizer ([Medscape](#), 24 Sep 2013). Thus, a major take-home message from this study is that earlier diagnosis and continuous support are factors that probably contribute to improved outcomes.

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