

# When health deteriorates, who does the housework?

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Credit: University of Utah

Older married women shoulder more housework than their husbands do even when neither of them are in the labor force—and health problems she may have don't change that arrangement unless they are significant.

A new study from the University of Utah that examined gender, [health](#) and housework among married, heterosexual couples who are no longer employed found a woman's health has to be considerably impaired before she stops doing chores and her husband takes on more of those duties.

"One thing we found is that even when people don't have these external demands on time, such as a job, they still have a very gendered way of doing things," said lead author Claudia Geist, an assistant professor at the University of Utah with joint appointments in sociology and gender studies. "Women still do more and their health is not as closely linked to them cutting back compared to men."

The study was published in the *Journal of Women & Aging*. Geist's co-author is Jennifer L. Tabler, who received her doctorate in sociology at the U in 2016 and is now an assistant professor at The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

Most research has looked at the way employment and income affect how couples negotiate the domestic division of labor, Geist said. But there is a gap in understanding what happens to people who are not in the labor force and who may also have [health problems](#).

"We wanted to understand how health could be a currency that could help decide who does what," Geist said.

The study relied on data on heterosexual married couples ages 60 and older who were no longer working from the 2009 and 2013 Disability and Use of Time (DUST) supplement to the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, a longitudinal study at the University of Michigan.

The researchers looked at whether poor health is associated with less housework to similar extents in men and women; whether men's health

problems reduced their housework engagement more strongly than women's health problems do; and whether women do more housework generally than men, regardless of their level of health.

The housework tasks included doing laundry; preparing dinner; cleaning house; grocery shopping or running errands; paying bills and handling banking; and doing minor home repairs and improvements. The researchers measured whether each duty was shared equally, the wife did more of the particular task or the husband did more.

The health measures included physical limitations, level of energy and functional limitations and number of days impacted.

The study found that even when neither person is working, women still do more housework. However, time spent on chores for both older women and men is shaped by their health. But the amount of time men spend on housework is less impacted by health—either their own health or that of their wives. That is partly because husbands' housework involvement is shaped by gender divisions in the first place, Geist said.

"We don't know if it's [women](#) holding on, guarding their domain—especially among the older generation with very traditional views of the division of labor—and only letting go if they really can't do it or if the [male partner](#) is getting away with not taking over for as long as possible," Geist said. "It is a sign that inequality exists, it will persist and male participation only increases under the most extreme circumstances."

The study's findings illustrate the need for male partners to be included in discussions with a woman's health provider if [poor health](#) becomes an issue that requires adjustments in the division of housework, Geist said. That's especially important if a woman's sense of being a good homemaker is affirmed to any degree through [housework](#).

"Just telling the female patient to cut back may not be enough," Geist said. "You may want the male partner to step up maybe a little earlier and be part of encouraging his wife to cut back."

**More information:** Claudia Geist et al. Somebody has to DUST! Gender, health, and housework in older couples, *Journal of Women & Aging* (2017). [DOI: 10.1080/08952841.2016.1259442](https://doi.org/10.1080/08952841.2016.1259442)

Provided by University of Utah

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