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Do Heartfelt Prayers Help the Heart?

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Perhaps no amount of science can disprove the existence of a God, but at least one study, just published in the *American Heart Journal*, suggests that praying to Him—or Her—doesn't help.

In six U.S. hospitals, researchers involved in the Study of Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer (STEP) analyzed the healing effects of third-party prayer—in which individuals pray for a stranger whom they have never met. The study volunteers—about 1,800 heart patients undergoing bypass surgery—were randomly divided into three groups: members of the first two groups were not told definitively that they would receive prayer—one of these groups received prayer, and the other did not—while members of the third group were told they would certainly be prayed for.

Daily prayers by three Christian groups began on the eve of the patients' surgeries and lasted for two weeks. The results? A tad, er, disheartening.

In the 30 days following bypass surgery, doctors found that prayer had no positive effect on rates of postoperative complications. In fact, complication rates in the first two groups—the ones that didn't know whether they were receiving prayer—were nearly identical. About 52% of the patients who were included in the Christian groups' prayers suffered complications, compared with 51% of the group that received no prayer at all. Meanwhile, the last group, which expected prayer and received it, had the highest rate of post-surgery problems, at 59%.

What It Means: Some previous studies have shown that prayer can have some impact on health, but this new one suggests that it offers no benefit. Whether it may help save your soul, however, is up to you.