

## USA Today

### Study shrugs off prayer's power to heal

By Liz Szabo, USA TODAY

Some say prayer can move mountains. But can anyone prove it helps heart patients sail through surgery? Researchers from six hospitals across the USA set out to try.

In the largest study to examine the effects of this profoundly personal activity, researchers found that asking strangers to pray for heart-bypass patients had no effect on their recovery. In fact, patients who were told that study volunteers were praying for them were actually more likely to suffer a medical complication. (**Related:** [Study Q&A](#))

Earlier studies have produced mixed results on the effects of praying for others. Dean Marek, a Catholic chaplain at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., who helped supervise the study, says the findings won't talk people out of asking God to help the people they love.

"What the study might do is help people more on the deeper realities of the meaning of prayer," he says.

While prayer takes many forms, researchers focused on a type whose outcome can be measured: praying that surgical patients would recover quickly without complications. They did not study the effects of praying for oneself, which past research has shown to have a relaxing effect. Study patients and their families also could pray for their recovery.

Volunteers from one Protestant prayer group and two Catholic ones prayed for patients in the trial, called the Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer (STEP), to be published Tuesday in the *American Heart Journal*.

Researchers randomly assigned patients to three groups: One group was prayed for; one was not prayed for; and a third group was told that people were praying for it. None of the patients in the first two groups knew whether people were praying for them. Among patients who didn't know that they were being prayed for, 51%-52% had a post-surgical complication, according to the study. A statistically significant 59% of those who knew others were praying for them had a complication, the study said.

These patients may have felt extra stress because they weren't allowed to tell doctors and nurses that they were being prayed for, says Charles Bethea, chief medical officer for the Integris Baptist Heart Hospital in Oklahoma City and a leader of the trial. Or, he says, they may have worried, "Are they so sick that they are calling in the prayer team?"

Mark Coppenger, a professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, believes in praying for others, but he questions the wisdom of measuring God's response. "It's my experience that God actually prompts our prayers," Coppenger says. "But I don't see him cooperating in a test."