

CAREGIVER HEALTH

A caregiver is someone who gives basic care to a person who has a chronic medical condition. A chronic condition is an illness that lasts for a long time or doesn't go away, such as cancer, effects of stroke, diabetes, and dementia. The caregiver helps the person with tasks such as preparing and eating food, taking medicine, bathing, and dressing. It's very common to feel stressed or overwhelmed from time to time as a caregiver. Too much stress can put a caregiver's health at risk.

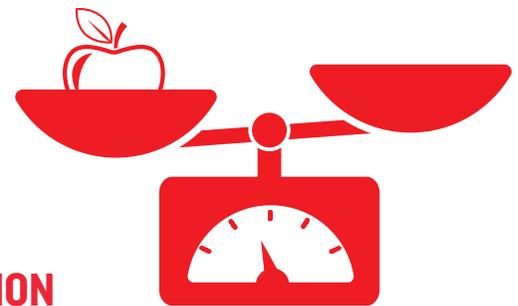
HEALTH RISKS

As a caregiver, am I at risk for health problems?

Yes. Because being a caregiver is so hard, your health may suffer. You may feel stressed or overwhelmed by being a caregiver. You may find that you spend much of your time caring for others, but neglect your own health. Some of the tasks of being a caregiver, such as lifting or bathing your loved one, may put extra strain on your body. Being a caregiver also can cause financial stress, and you may avoid going to the doctor so you don't have to pay for visits or treatments. All of these things can affect your emotional, mental, and physical health.

Studies show that caregivers have an increased risk for:

- Alcohol, tobacco, and drug abuse
- Anxiety disorders
- Cancer
- Diabetes
- Heart disease
- Heartburn
- Infection
- Obesity
- Pain, such as muscle or joint pain and headaches
- Stress and depression



PREVENTION

As a caregiver, what can I do to take care of my health?

Make wellness a priority. You may feel like you have to “do it all,” regardless of the toll it takes on you. However, you can't take care of others if you don't take care of yourself. Take time out of your day to:

- Eat a balanced diet
- Get plenty of rest
- Exercise
- Manage stress
- Avoid alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs

Seek treatment. If you think you might have a physical or emotional problem, be sure to see your family doctor as soon as possible. Your health and well-being are important. Even if you don't think you're sick, it's still important to see your doctor for regular check-ups. Your doctor can help you stay healthy by providing preventive services, including health tests and screenings, vaccinations, and health advice.

Take a break from caregiving. Accept that there is a limit to what you can do as a caregiver. Recognize when you feel overwhelmed or are physically unable to complete a task, and ask for help in caring for your loved one. Plan for times when you will need help by making a list of people who are willing to lend a hand. Or, look into community services such as in-home health care, adult day care, respite care, and meal delivery or transportation services.

BALANCING WORK AND CAREGIVING

According to the Administration on Aging, approximately two-thirds of all family caregivers also work outside the home. If you're currently caring for a loved one, chances are you often feel overwhelmed by the difficulty of balancing your responsibilities to your loved ones, your home, and your job. You're not alone.

Research employer policies and programs.

Many companies are starting to recognize the unique needs of caregivers. Talk with your human resources department and look through your employee manual to determine whether your company has policies in place or benefits available to help you manage your roles. Examples may include the following:

- The Family and Medical Leave Act entitles eligible employees to take 12 weeks per year of unpaid leave to care for a family member. Taking this leave would not impact your health insurance coverage or job security.
- Employee assistance programs help employees deal with problems that might affect their work. Often, these programs include short-term counseling and referrals to services in the community.

- Flex time is a flexible work schedule. You're probably familiar with the standard 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. workday. If your company allows flex time, your employee handbook will usually define a core period of time during which you must be at work (e.g., from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.).
- Telecommuting allows you to work from another location, such as home, for a set number of hours or days each week.
- Job sharing is when two people are hired on a part-time or reduced-time basis to complete a job normally held by one person.

SCHEDULE YOUR TASKS

Make a schedule with your family members. This will help all of you stay organized and will help you manage the demands on your time. Include all activities, appointments, and regularly scheduled tasks, such as bill payments. Don't forget to also schedule time for things you enjoy, such as visiting with friends or going out to dinner or a movie.



REFERENCES

All information sourced from FamilyDoctor.org, a resource operated by the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP)