

Caregivers and Your Health: How to Manage Stress

Caregivers know that providing care for a loved one can be very rewarding, but it can also lead to ongoing, high stress levels.

A recent nationwide study by Evercare®, “*Caregivers in Decline*” (2006), of caregivers whose own health is at risk because of their caregiving duties found that stress is their Number One issue. Caregiver’s stress can be different from other types of stress since it is typically an ongoing, long-term, “chronic” condition making it a struggle to cope day-to-day. Health care professionals warn that chronic stress can lead to increased health risks such as higher blood pressure, heart attack scares, arthritis flare-ups, acid reflux, head, neck and back aches, and other serious conditions. Stress can also lead to depression – the study found that 91 percent of these caregivers in decline reported suffering from depression.

To cope with their stress, 10 percent of the study’s caregivers report misusing alcohol or prescription drugs. At the same time, 72 percent of the caregivers in the study report they skip regular doctor appointments, don’t get enough exercise, or often don’t eat right.

What is most alarming is that more than half (53 percent) of the caregivers surveyed say that this decline in healthy behaviors has already affected their ability to provide care.

The important message for caregivers is that caregiving must include caring for yourself. If you become too ill to continue caring for your loved one, then both your health as well as the health and well-being of your loved one are at risk.

Coping with stress can be difficult but is essential to your caregiving responsibilities. Following are some tips to help caregivers get some relief from their stress:

Speak Up. Most caregivers do not identify that they are fulfilling a special role in our society – that of caregiver. In the same way you may be a mother, father, daughter, son, employee – your role as caregiver means you have special responsibilities and thus, special needs for yourself.

Learn to say “Yes” to offers of help. In fact, have a list ready when someone offers to lend a hand, whether it’s grocery shopping or staying with a loved one so you can go to the doctor. It not only helps you, but gives them satisfaction that they are supporting you.

Create a support network. Caregivers often feel they carry their burden alone. But, most have friends, family, church groups or other support groups who are ready and willing to lend a hand. Use this available support to maintain your health and relieve stress.

Watch your own health. Don’t ignore your doctor appointments. Be sure to eat right and get some exercise – even a few minutes a day can make a difference. It’s amazing how proper nutrition and physical exercise can renew your energy and your outlook.

Give yourself a break. Make a schedule that provides you some time off to focus on your own needs. Plan with other family members, friends or home health aides to give you the respite you need.

Review your loved one's health care coverage. Some health plans for people on Medicare and Medicaid provide support to family caregivers, such as respite care and transportation help.

Seek expert advice. Care Managers offered by some health plans can help you shoulder your caregiving responsibilities by guiding you to resources and services, and relieving some of the stress involved in providing care.

The most important thing to remember is that you are not alone. Caregiving is an invaluable, important role that millions of people play each day. By taking good care of yourself, and looking for ways to relieve some of the stress involved in providing care, you can take better care of those you love.

These tips were developed by Evercare® expert Nurse Practitioners and Care Managers

Visit EvercareHealthPlans.com to read more about the caregiver health study and to find out more about caregiver support services and programs.