

Everyone is telling us to take responsibility for our own health. We hear it on TV and we read it in magazines. Prevention is the message of the day.

Unfortunately, family caregivers as a rule don't always do a good job of taking care of ourselves. We are always putting our loved ones' health and well-being first. After that, there isn't much time or energy left.

The research is clear, however: The extreme stress that family caregiving can cause actually has been shown to affect our immune systems, making us more prone to chronic illnesses ourselves. It can cause premature aging, and, in some cases, can result in premature death. Caregiving can even affect the health of our teeth.

- **If you are run-down**, more tired than usual, will you be able to provide good care?
- **If you have a cold or the flu**, will your loved one catch it from you?
- **If you become depressed**, will you be able to make good decisions? Will life become unbearable?
- **If you are not well**, who will fill your shoes, whether temporarily or permanently?

These are not questions to be taken lightly. Your own good health is the best present you can give your care recipient.



NATIONAL FAMILY CAREGIVERS ASSOCIATION

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www.thefamilycaregiver.org

NFCA is the nation's leading constituency organization for family caregivers. NFCA educates, supports, empowers, and speaks up for the more than 50 million Americans who care for loved ones with a chronic illness or disability, no matter what their age or diagnosis.

NFCA is grateful to all the generous corporations and foundations that are partnering with us in support of NFC Month 2006.

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The Best Present You Can Give Your Loved One: Your Own Good Health

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Helpful Ideas
For Family Caregivers
From NFCA

Recently, one of my daughter's physicians told me, "The worst thing that can happen to your daughter is not her health problems; the worst thing that can happen to your daughter is not having you to care for her." This confirmed and encouraged my attitude as a caregiver that my well-being is my daughter's well-being.

—Linda Reid, Oneonta, AL

So how do you go about it? How do you take care of you while caring for another? Whether you are a 24/7 caregiver at home or a working family caregiver, the challenge is the same. How do you find the time and the energy needed for self-care?

Getting Started

You begin by believing — truly believing — that protecting your health is an absolutely critical thing to do for yourself and your loved one. You may not be able to do this easily, especially if guilt tends to get in your way. But it is vital that you try.

- Put reminders around the house.
- Talk to other family caregivers.
- Have a heart-to-heart with your loved one about their concerns regarding your well-being. You may well find that they worry about your health just as much as you worry about theirs.

If you don't believe that something is really important, you'll put it at the very end of your "To Do" list. And you really do need to put self-care near the top.

Easy Ways to Protect Your Health

— Every Day

- **Take a daily vitamin supplement.** Being on the go often means we don't get our five-a-day fruits and vegetables. Taking a daily multivitamin supplement can fill in those gaps.
- **Brush and floss your teeth.** When you are oh, so tired, it is understandable that you just may want to crawl into bed. Consider brushing and flossing your teeth right after dinner, when you aren't as wiped out.

— Every Week

- **Exercise — even a little.** Exercise is one of the first things to go in a busy caregiver's schedule. Physical caregiving can certainly provide some "incidental" exercise, but it is wise to try to get some regular exercise as well. It's a great way to reduce stress and ward off depression. Could you allocate 10 minutes three or four times a week to take a walk? Walking outside in good weather is nicest of course, but even power walking through your house and up and down some stairs will work. Start small. And don't beat yourself up if some weeks it doesn't happen. Just remember that it is really good for you and try to make it happen.
- **Find a caregiving buddy.** Having another family caregiver to talk with can go a long way toward lessening your isolation. A buddy or a support group does just that — supports you, helps you think things through, helps you find new resources, and reminds you that others are experiencing the same or similar problems too.

— Every Month

- **Get away from your caregiving to have some fun** at least once a month, but ideally more than that. Whether it is dinner with friends, a manicure or a massage, doing something for you will make you feel so much better.

- **Add some spirituality to your life.** Whether it is through reading poetry or going to church, we all need to renew our soul and our connection to something larger than ourselves. Try to do this as often as you can.

— Every Year

- **Get a flu vaccination.** The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends family caregivers get an annual flu vaccination to protect their loved ones. Our chronically ill loved ones are considered high risk. Since we are out and about mingling with others, we could bring the flu home and infect our loved ones; and because they depend on us for care, keeping us flu-free is considered really important as well. Now more than ever, with concerns about a flu pandemic, getting your flu vaccination is one of the most important things you can do to protect your health and your loved one's.
- **Have an annual physical.** The last place you want to spend time is another doctor's office, but taking the time for a check-up once a year could save you countless hours in doctors' offices later. Small problems that go undetected and untreated can turn into big problems that threaten your life. For women, an annual Pap smear and, "if you are of a certain age," a mammogram is absolutely critical. Make it a point to tell your doctor that you are a family caregiver and how that is affecting you — your mood, sleeping and eating patterns, your back, etc.
- **Have a real respite.** Going to a movie is great, but to get a real respite that renews your spirit and your soul it is important to have a change of venue. A week or two away would be fantastic, but is totally unrealistic for most of us. Even a weekend may be hard to pull off, but the effort it takes to make it happen can pay huge dividends. We all need a break from our loved ones once in a while — and they need a break from us as well.

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It's not easy to take care of yourself when you are a family caregiver, but it is so important to try. Don't let misplaced guilt sideline you. You work so hard and do so much and you are doing the very best you can. Your effort and your sacrifices need to be acknowledged. Because you need to be there for someone else, the importance of taking care of You cannot be overstated. Some days, some weeks, some months, you'll let self-care activities slide. We all do. It's only natural. The challenge we all face is not letting the down times outnumber the times we are actively doing something that is healthful and helpful. Not easy, but all we can do is try. Good luck!

TWO SIDEBARS FROM DEBBY

Questions to Ask Your Healthcare Professional:

1. Am I at risk for catching the flu and/or developing complications from the flu?
2. Should I get a flu vaccination?
3. Can I pass the flu on to others if I'm not vaccinated?
4. Should my loved one(s) get vaccinated against the flu?
5. Given my medical history, what are the side effects of getting a flu vaccination?

For more information:

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