



How Should I Care for Myself as a Caregiver?

As a caregiver, you have a higher risk for health and emotional problems. That's because caregivers are less likely to attend to their own health by eating a healthy diet, getting physical activity and treating physical and emotional problems. It may feel as though your first responsibility is to your loved one, but it's really to yourself.

Learn to organize your duties as a caregiver. Find the time to take care of your own health. It will help you do a better job for your loved one. Set time aside each day and do something just for you.



How do I care for my physical health?

- **Be physically active.** Exercise reduces stress, enhances sleep and can help reduce the risk of heart disease and stroke. Moderate-intensity physical activities, such as brisk walking, for at least 150 minutes a week can have great benefits for both you and your loved one.
- **Eat a diet low in saturated and trans fats, sodium (salt) and added sugars.** Chances are your loved one has been told to follow a healthier diet or to lose weight. Why not make it easier and adopt the same diet for your whole family?
- **Get enough sleep.** Aim to get 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night. Good sleep benefits your whole body including your heart and brain with effects such as improved mood, memory and reasoning.
- **Schedule regular checkups with your doctor or other health care professional.** A checkup can identify problems such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol and depression. Early detection helps prevent serious problems.
- **Learn to cope with stress.** Identify your sources of stress and determine what you can and cannot change. Then decide what steps you can take reduce your stress. Stress

reducers could include activities such as exercising, reading, meditating, deep breathing or spending time with family or friends. Think about what stress reducers may work for you.

How do I care for my emotional health?

Caregiving can have a big emotional impact. Depression is very common among caregivers due to the constant demands faced in providing care.

Learn the signs of depression and get help if you experience several of these symptoms for two weeks or more.

- Depressed mood
- Marked loss of interest or pleasure
- Feelings of worthlessness or guilt
- Change in appetite or weight
- Loss of energy
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Lack of interest in sex or personal hygiene
- Anxiety

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- Tearfulness
- Agitation or restlessness
- Inability to concentrate or make decisions
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Frustration or anger

Depression can often be treated with medication. If you need help dealing with your emotions, seek out a support group, counselor or other health care professionals.

Tips for Taking Care of Yourself

The Family Caregiver Alliance offers these tips for family caregivers.

1. Maintain a life and connections outside of caregiving. Don't let your loved one's illness or disability always take center stage. Don't feel guilty about thinking about your needs and feelings.
2. Take time for yourself. Remember to be good to yourself. Love, honor and value yourself. You're doing a very hard job and you deserve some quality time, just for you.

3. When people offer to help, accept the offer and suggest specific things they can do.
4. Educate yourself about your loved one's condition. Information is empowering. You may be able to learn things to make your caregiving role easier.
5. Be open to new technologies and ideas that promote your loved one's independence and make your job easier.
6. Acknowledge your grief and loss in the changes that have occurred to your loved one.
7. Seek support from other caregivers. There is great strength in knowing that you are not alone.

HOW CAN I LEARN MORE?

- 1 Call 1-800-AHA-USA1 (1-800-242-8721), or visit heart.org to learn more about heart disease and stroke.
- 2 Sign up for our monthly *Heart Insight* e-news for heart patients and their families at HeartInsight.org.
- 3 Connect with others sharing similar journeys with heart disease and stroke by joining our Support Network at heart.org/SupportNetwork.

Do you have questions for your doctor or nurse?

Take a few minutes to write down your questions for the next time you see your health care professional.

For example:

Can you recommend a caregiver support group in my area?

MY QUESTIONS:

We have many other fact sheets to help you make healthier choices to reduce your risk for heart disease, manage your condition or care for a loved one. Visit heart.org/AnswersByHeart to learn more.