

Caregiver Stress

A caregiver is anyone who provides care for another person in need, such as a child, an aging parent, a husband or wife, friend, or neighbor. Caregiving can be rewarding, but it can also be challenging. Stress from caregiving is common. Women especially are at risk for the harmful health effects of caregiver stress.

Q: What is caregiver stress?

A: Caregiver stress is due to the emotional and physical strain of caregiving. Caregivers report much higher levels of stress than people who are not caregivers. Many caregivers are providing help or are “on call” almost all day. Some caregivers may feel overwhelmed by the amount of care their aging, sick, or disabled family member needs.

Q: What are the signs and symptoms of caregiver stress?

A: Caregiver stress can take many forms. You may feel frustrated and angry one minute and helpless the next. You may make mistakes when giving medicines. Or you may turn to unhealthy behaviors like smoking or drinking too much alcohol.

Other signs and symptoms include:

- Feeling overwhelmed
- Feeling alone, isolated, or deserted by others
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Gaining or losing a lot of weight
- Feeling tired most of the time
- Losing interest in activities you used to enjoy

- Feeling worried or sad often
- Having headaches or body aches often

Q: How does caregiver stress affect my health?

A: Some of the ways stress affects caregivers include:

- **Depression and anxiety.** Women who are caregivers are more likely than men to develop symptoms of anxiety and depression.
- **Weak immune system.** Stressed caregivers may spend more days sick with the cold or flu. A weak immune system can also make vaccines such as flu shots less effective. Also, it may take longer to recover from surgery.
- **Obesity.** Stress causes more weight gain in women than in men. Obesity raises your risk for other health problems, including heart disease, stroke, and diabetes.
- **Higher risk for chronic diseases.** High levels of stress can raise your risk for health problems, such as heart disease, cancer, diabetes, or arthritis.
- **Problems with short-term memory or paying attention.** Caregivers of spouses with Alzheimer’s disease are at higher risk for problems with short-term memory and focusing.

Q: What can I do to prevent or relieve stress?

A: Here are some tips to help you prevent or manage caregiver stress:

- Take a class that teaches you how to care for someone with an injury or illness. To find these classes, ask your doctor or call your local Area Agency on Aging.
- Find caregiving resources in your community to give you a break. Your community may have adult daycare services or respite services.
- Ask for and accept help. Make a list of ways others can help you, such as getting groceries or sitting with the person while you do an errand.
- Make to-do lists, and set a daily routine.
- Stay in touch with family and friends, and do things you enjoy with your loved ones.
- Take care of your health. See your doctor for checkups, find time to be physically active on most days of the week, choose healthy foods, and get enough sleep.
- Ask for and accept help. Make a list of ways others can help you, such as getting groceries or sitting with the person while you do an errand.

For more information...

For more information about caregiver stress, call the OWH Helpline at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services

800-633-4227 • www.cms.hhs.gov

Eldercare Locator, Administration on Aging, HHS

800-677-1116 • www.eldercare.gov

Family Caregiver Alliance

800-445-8106 • www.caregiver.org

National Alliance for Caregiving

301-718-8444 • www.caregiving.org

Caregiver Action Network

202-454-3970 • www.caregiveraction.org

ARCH National Respite Network and Resource Center

www.archrespite.org

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