

Office of Research on Women's Health

Based on the ORWH Women's Health
Science Seminar Series
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2008



Caregiving
Take Care of Your Health
Resources

Caregiving for the Caregivers

Self-Care for Caregivers

Caregiving

“More than one-third of caregivers provide intense and continuing care to others while suffering from poor health themselves.”¹

Close to 80 percent of all long-term care is provided at home by family caregivers. Women provide the majority of informal care to spouses, parents, parents-in-law, siblings, friends, and neighbors. Women also play multiple other roles while providing care for their families. They serve as healthcare providers, friends, companions, decisionmakers, and advocates, while also working and caring for their children. Although women provide the majority of long-term care in this country, they also have long-term needs. Women live longer than men, often outlive their spouses, and have less access to pension plans or retirement savings. Caring for a loved one can be an immensely valuable and positive experience, but women also have long-term care needs. Women must take care of themselves first in order to take care of others; this includes being aware of the financial and, most importantly, health consequences of caregiving. So, do what you can to make sure that you are taking care of yourself!

Taking care of yourself

In order to be able to take care of others, you must take care of yourself. Eating right, staying active, and making sure your affairs are in order are good places

to start. Respite care or the provision of short-term, temporary relief may also be needed for the caregiver. The ARCH National Respite Network (see Resources) and the National Family Caregivers Association (see Resources) educate and support caregivers.

Eat well

The National Cancer Institute recommends that women eat seven servings of fruits and vegetables a day as part of an active lifestyle. Eating plenty of fruits and vegetables every day can reduce your risk for heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes, and some cancers. Servings are relatively small—one serving of fruits or vegetables should fit in the palm of your hand.

Be active

Physical activity is very important. Try an activity you enjoy like dancing, hiking, or fast walking. Many people like being active in a group so they can cheer one another on, have company, and feel safer when they are outdoors. There may be a recreation center near your home that you can join.

If you're pressed for time, little changes can add up. Try getting off the bus or subway one stop early to walk the rest of the way (be sure the area is safe). Park your car farther away and walk to your destination. Take the stairs instead of the elevator. Walk to each end of the mall when you go shopping.

¹ Navaie-Waliser M, Feldman PH, Gould DA, Levine CL, Kuerbis AN, Donelan K. When the caregiver needs care: the plight of vulnerable caregivers. *Am J Public Health.* 2002;92(3):409-413.



Get your own affairs in order

As a caregiver, you already know the importance of tracking financial and medical records. Planning ahead in case of an emergency can make all the difference. You know what information you need as a caregiver; try to put these same documents in place should you fall into the care-receiving role. Here are some steps that can help you plan how your affairs will be handled in the future:

- Gather everything you can about your income, investments, insurance, and savings.
- Put your important papers and copies of legal documents in one place. A drawer or separate file will work or you can list the location of the papers in a notebook. If you use a bank safe deposit box, keep copies in a file at home. Check each year to see if there's anything new to add.
- Tell a trusted family member or friend where you put all your important papers. They don't have to know what you've put in the safe spot, but be sure to tell them or a lawyer where they can find everything should an emergency occur.
- Give consent in advance for your doctor or lawyer to talk with your caregiver as needed. There may be questions about your care, a bill, or a health insurance claim. Without your consent, your caregiver may not be able to get needed information. You can give permission in advance to Medicare, a credit card company, your bank, or your doctor. Sometimes you can give your OK over the telephone. At other times, you may need to sign and return a form.

Take Care of Your Health

High levels of depression, anxiety, and other mental health issues are common among women who are caregivers. In addition, women may be at greater risk for heart disease and high blood pressure. If you are a caregiver, but are in poor health yourself, then make sure to address your healthcare needs. You cannot adequately provide care if your own health is being sacrificed. Furthermore, make sure to communicate with your doctor about any health concerns. Lastly, reach out for help from family, friends, healthcare providers, caregiving resources, and support groups.

Resources

Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development
<http://www.nichd.nih.gov/>

National Cancer Institute
<http://www.cancer.gov/>

National Institute on Aging Information Center
<http://www.nia.nih.gov>

National Institute of Nursing Research
<http://www.ninr.nih.gov/>

Alzheimer's Association online
<http://www.alz.org/>, or contact a local chapter for more information.

ARCH National Respite Network
<http://chtop.org/ARCH.html>

Family Caregiver Alliance
National Center on Caregiving
http://www.caregiver.org/caregiver/jsp/content_node.jsp?nodeid=368

National Family Caregivers Association
<http://www.nfcacares.org/>