

## Your Health: Tips for Caregivers



Many people care for a spouse, parent, or other family member who is disabled or ill.

Caregiving can be rewarding, especially when you know that your care makes a positive difference. But it can also be hard. There are three keys to being a good caregiver:

- Take care of yourself.
- Do not help too much.
- Ask for help.

### Take care of yourself

Taking care of yourself is your most important step as a caregiver. Caregivers are more likely than those who are not caregivers to be at risk for colds and the flu and also chronic illness, such as heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.

On the other hand, when caregivers take time to care for themselves, good things usually happen:

- They stay healthier.
- They feel better about themselves.
- They have more energy and enthusiasm and can keep giving care.

Here are some important things that you need to find time to do for yourself:

- Get some exercise, even just a few minutes several times a day. You may feel better and sleep better if you exercise.
- Eat healthy meals and snacks. Healthy meals are easy to prepare, and healthy eating will give you more energy to carry you through each day.
- Get enough sleep. If you are not getting enough sleep at night, take a nap during the day. Plan to get at least one full night's rest each week.
- Make time for an activity you enjoy, even if you can only do it for a few minutes each day. Ask a friend or family member to stay with your loved one for an hour or two once or twice a week.
- Make an effort each day to stay connected with family, friends, and others in your support system.
- Get regular medical and dental checkups. Even if you have always been healthy, you need to stay healthy. Know about the signs of depression, and watch for them not only in the person you are caring for but also in yourself. If you feel sad or hopeless and the feelings do not go away, talk with your doctor.

### Do not help too much

As a caregiver, your highest goal is to give the person you are caring for the power and the permission to be in control of his or her own life (as much as possible).

Here are some things you can do to help the person you are caring for be as independent as possible:

- Let the person make as many decisions as possible. For example, let the person decide what to wear, what to eat, or when to go to bed. Help him or her keep as much control as possible.
- Simplify. For example, if you are caring for someone with mild dementia, divide complex tasks into simpler parts: First, get out the cereal box; next, get out the milk and the bowl, and so on.
- Make it easy. One of the best things a caregiver can do is to make changes to the person's home that will let the person do things without help.
- Allow for mistakes. The hardest thing about letting someone do something alone is knowing that you could do it better or faster. Mistakes are okay.
- Reward both the effort and the result. Help the person feel good about doing things alone.
- Give the person responsibility to care for something. Studies show that nursing home residents who are asked to care for pets or plants live longer and become more independent.

## Ask for help

Services that may be useful to caregivers include the following:

**Respite care.** This may be the most important service for caregivers. Respite services provide someone who will stay with the person while you get out of the house for a few hours.

**Adult day centers.** These are "drop-off" sites where a person who does not need individual attention can stay during the day. This service is usually offered during working hours.

**Adult foster care or board-and-care homes.** These are private homes where older adults receive personal care.

**Nursing homes.** These generally have two levels of care. Intermediate care includes help with using the toilet, dressing, and personal care for people without serious medical problems. Skilled nursing care is usually for people who have just come from the hospital or others with medical problems that require more nursing care.

**Hospice programs.** These provide social, personal, and medical services to people who are terminally ill.

**Disability assistance programs and businesses.** These provide a range of items and services for people with different types of disabilities and their caregivers. For example, they can provide special clothing and equipment, special technology, and education.

**Support groups.** Support groups give you a chance to discuss problems or concerns with other caregivers.

To learn whether these services are available in your community, look under "Senior Citizen Services" in the Yellow Pages.