

Protecting the Health of Family Caregivers

[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – Safer, healthier people.

Caregivers are necessary for providing long-term care at home. Unpaid caregivers provide about 90 percent of this long-term care. Most of these people care for someone age 50 or older, and many are older adults themselves.

Consider these facts:

- * More than 34 million unpaid caregivers are providing care to someone age 18 or older who is ill or has a disability.
- * For Alzheimer's disease alone, there are an estimated 9.8 million caregivers providing 8.4 billion hours of care each year.
- * One out of every five households in the U.S. is impacted by caregiving responsibilities.
- * The average caregiver provides 20 to 25 hours of assistance per week. Many caregivers provide a lot more.
- * In 2007, the economic value of family caregivers' unpaid contributions was approximately 375 billion dollars.

While unpaid caregivers often get satisfaction from their efforts, caregiving can be stressful and contribute to depression and eventually to negative health effects for the caregiver. Caregivers often have or develop their own health problems during the course of caregiving. There are a number of studies that show that caregivers develop high blood pressure, lowered immunity, or back pain from trying to turn someone in bed who is frail. Some caregivers also report that they have trouble sleeping, fail to tend to their own preventive health care, and neglect good diet and exercise habits. A decline in the caregiver's health often leads to institutionalization of the care recipient.

In addition to health impacts, caregivers may spend their own money to provide care, and they also have to cut back on work hours or quit their job altogether. This may cause them to lose income and health insurance and reduce their retirement savings and Social Security benefits.

Keeping caregivers healthy is a societal concern, as well as a family concern. Experts urge caregivers to take breaks from caregiving; to take care of their own health and well-being through good diet, exercise, and preventive health habits; and to join a support group. Many caregivers also need professional assessment, training, and respite care.

Respite care services give the caregiver a break by providing someone else to stay with the care recipient for a brief period of time, or allowing the care recipient to stay a few hours in an adult day care program or a few days in a nursing home.

The Institute of Medicine recommends that health care providers, community groups, and other public and private entities make training available for informal caregivers on providing care and alleviating stress.

The Older Americans Act offers some of these caregiver services through the National Family Caregiver Support Program. Services include information, assistance, individual counseling, support groups, training, respite, and supplemental services.

The Medicare program can cover respite care through the hospice benefit. Caregivers can also receive assistance from hospital discharge planners, respite care programs, stress reduction programs, and the national Eldercare Locator service that connects users with local services. You can reach Eldercare Locator by calling 1-800-677-1116 or visiting www.eldercare.gov.

Physicians and health care providers can help by asking caregivers questions about their role and connecting them to assistance as needed. Churches, senior centers, and community organizations can also urge caregivers to take care of their health and access preventive health services. With the right combination of support, caregivers can continue to do what they do best — care for their family members.

For more information about caregiving, please visit www.cdc.gov/aging/caregiving.

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[Announcer] For the most accurate health information, visit www.cdc.gov or call 1-800-CDC-INFO 24-7.