

Caring for the Caregiver



One of the most important gifts caregivers can give their loved ones is their own good health. A healthy caregiver is more patient and provides better care than one who is worn down or burned out from stress and fatigue. But many caregivers find it difficult to schedule in “me” time.

This pamphlet focuses on strategies that help caregivers manage their own physical health and maintain a good quality of life.

Eat Right

Diets rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean protein provide the best fuel for undertaking caregiving responsibilities. The following three tips contribute to eating right:

Plan ahead. Planning ahead is one way to avoid the high-fat, high-sodium content of many convenience foods. The following ideas may reduce the temptation to reach for them:

- Choose nutrient-dense foods. These foods provide the nutrients (vitamins, minerals, etc.) you need with the fewest calories.



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These are the opposite of “empty-calorie foods.” Example: Mangos are nutrient dense, while mango-flavored punch is an empty-calorie food.

- Keep the refrigerator and freezer stocked with healthy foods you like.
- Make a couple of large meals and use the leftovers for meals on the run.
- Keep pre-sliced veggies and fruit in the refrigerator.
- Carry granola bars or whole fruit for snacks on the go.

Keep it simple. When planning meals, choose foods that reduce food preparation time.

- One-dish meals require less clean-up.
- Recipes with very few ingredients keep shopping and prep time to a minimum.
- Familiar recipes require less thought and planning.

Make good choices. There will always be nights that purchasing fast food is the best option. You can make good choices by following these rules:

- Choose grilled over breaded or fried protein sources.
- Choose water, milk, or 100% fruit juice over soda.
- Choose steamed veggies or fresh fruit over fried side orders.
- Choose small portions or share a larger order with others.

Get Enough Sleep

Most adults need 7-9 hours of sleep a night to perform at their peak. Sleep is important in maintaining a healthy immune system, managing weight, reducing risks of certain chronic diseases, and managing difficult emotions— all of which are critical to successful caregiving. But for



many reasons, sleep patterns are affected as caregiving stress mounts. Because so many factors contribute to the quality and quantity of sleep, there is no simple formula for a good night's sleep, but common recommendations include the following:

- Set a specific bedtime and waking time
- Keep bedrooms dark while sleeping
- Turn off possible distractions (television or laptop) when in bed
- Follow a bedtime routine every night

If these and other common sleeping tips don't help improve your quality of sleep, work with a doctor or healthcare professional to explore additional options.

Exercise

Exercise is the third important key to caring for the caregiver. It increases the level of oxygen feeding the brain, helps maintain good sleep patterns, reduces stress levels, and combats chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and even Alzheimer's disease. But just knowing what is good for us doesn't always mean we will actually do it! If you aren't already exercising regularly, ask yourself:

- What's keeping me from it?
 - What type of exercise do I most enjoy?
 - How can I fit just 10 minutes of exercise into my day?
 - What will keep me motivated to continue exercising?
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