

Caregivers need to take care of themselves, too



Yesterday my mother wandered away from the house.

I was terrified. I searched up and down the neighborhood shouting her name. But she was nowhere to be found. After two hours of searching, I found her sitting on a bench at the neighborhood baseball field. I was so angry with her, even though I knew it wasn't her fault. I felt so guilty. How could I let this happen? My mother was diagnosed with

Alzheimer's disease three years ago and ever since then I have been taking care of her in my home. I could have never imagined how hard it would be.

There is a constant battle between caring for her, doing chores around the house, running errands, finding time for myself and working as a nurse at the hospital. I am always stressed.

Who are Caregivers?

A caregiver is a person who provides care for someone with a disabling condition. Examples of disabling conditions are: dementia (Alzheimer's disease), brain injuries (stroke) and cancer. Caregivers help with feeding, bathing, cooking, cleaning, toileting and administering medications. Informal caregivers are people who are not trained or paid to care for others. These people can be adults caring for their spouse, parents, grandparents, children, friends or neighbors. According to the Department of Health and Human Resources, most Americans will become informal caregivers in their lifetime. In the United States, approximately 44 million adults are informal caregivers. About 61 percent of these people are women and about 59 percent of caregivers also have a job.

What is Caregiver Stress?

Caregivers are at high risk for stress. It is difficult to care for your loved one, care for your immediate family, maintain a social life, have time for relaxation and exercise and continue to work at your job. The stress can take a major toll on your health.

The definition of caregiver stress is "the emotional and physical strain of caregiving." The stress may include feeling frustrated, angry, lonely, guilty and/or exhausted (www.hhs.gov).

Moderate stress is a normal part of everyday life. Many caregivers are not able to balance their stressors and subsequently their immune system is affected. Your immune system is what protects you from infections and



disease. Experts believe that high amounts of stress can cause hypertension, coronary artery disease and even an early death.

Because of the high amounts of stress, caregivers are also at risk for depression, anxiety, obesity, the flu, heart disease, cancer and diabetes. Many of these medical problems are due to the fact that caregivers have difficulty finding time to go to the doctors. Caregivers may not be receiving necessary medications, cancer screenings and physical exams.

Reducing Caregiver Stress

If your stress level is high, you may need to talk to your doctor. Signs of stress are: sleeping too much or too little, gaining or losing a lot of weight, feeling tired all the time, loss of interest in activities you like, easily angered, always worried, feeling sad most of the time and/or abusing alcohol or drugs. If you are experiencing any of these signs it is very important to talk to your doctor. Search your community for helpful resources. Your local hospital may offer caregiver classes. Meal programs, like Meals on Wheels, are great services for older adults to help provide meals. Home health services such as nursing care or physical therapy can be helpful in assisting with the daily needs of your loved one. Having a family member or neighbor cook meals may also help reduce stress.

Caregiving is not an easy task. There are times when you may feel guilty that you are not doing a good job. You are trying your best and there is no such thing as the "perfect caregiver." Do not take on tasks that will be too challenging, such as having Thanksgiving dinner at your house. Ask for help from your family and friends. Reach out to people. Make sure you set aside time for you. Go shopping, go out to dinner or go to the movies. And always remember to eat healthy, exercise, get enough sleep and go to the doctor's! Practice the "10 Keys" to Healthy Aging and live to a "Healthier Tomorrow."

Important Numbers Available to You

- Allegheny County Area Agency on Aging — 800-3444319
- Greater Pennsylvania Alzheimer's Association Hotline — 800-272-3900 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week for support and answers to your questions)
- Pennsylvania Department of Aging website — www.aging.state.pa.us for other resources.

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CHA is a part of the Department of Epidemiology in the Graduate School of Public Health at the University of Pittsburgh. It is one of 33 Prevention

Research Centers in the United States funded by the Centers for Disease Control. For questions or more information contact David J. Fetterman, Community Outreach Coordinator at the Center for Healthy Aging at 412-383-3121 or visit www.healthyaging.pitt.edu.