

Stresses of being a caregiver

Daily life can present abundant sources of stress. When you couple that with caring for a spouse, parent, sibling, or child who is disabled or chronically ill, the stress of being a caregiver can become overwhelming.

There are an estimated 25 million family caregivers in the United States. Their family members often require special care, including around-the-clock supervision, specialized communications, and help with daily activities.

Caregivers can experience enormous stress from their added responsibilities

in caring for a loved one. They can become depressed, anxious, or develop other physical ailments as a result of the stress of caregiving.

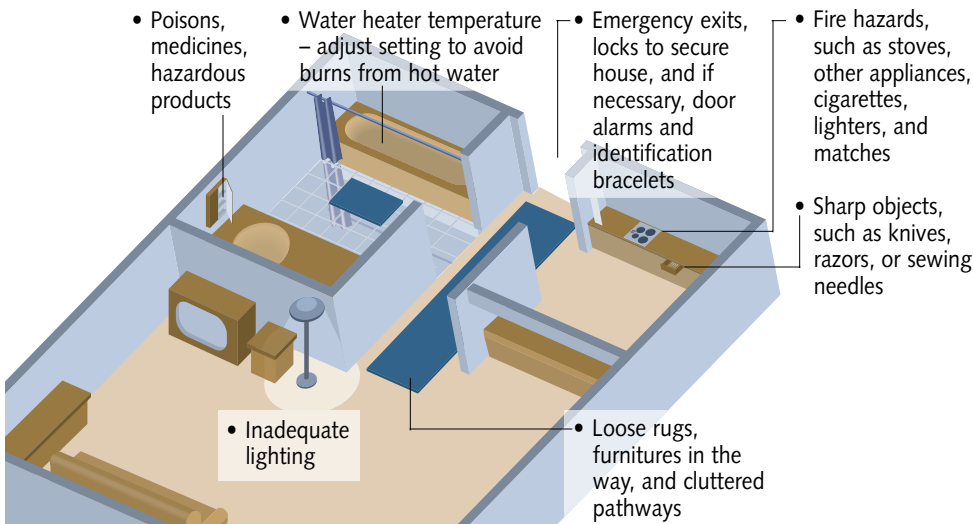
Research has recognized the impact of being a caregiver on people's health. A study in the December 15, 1999, issue of *JAMA* shows that an elderly caregiver who experiences mental or emotional strain while caring for a disabled spouse is at a higher risk of death than spouses who are not caring for a disabled spouse. However, spouses who were providing care but did not experience strain did not have a higher death rate.

INFORMATION YOU SHOULD KNOW:

- Name and telephone number of all of your loved one's health care providers
- Medical conditions and treatment plans, including medications, special diets, or activities
- Where vital information about bank accounts, wills, and insurance are kept
- Community agencies and other resources that assist in caregiving

HOME SAFETY CHECKLIST:

Caregivers should be aware of the following potential dangers in the home when caring for an impaired relative:



WAYS TO REDUCE STRESS:

- Don't take on more responsibility than you can handle. Learn to say no or get someone else to help.
- Use relaxation techniques like meditating, visualizing comforting scenes, or listening to music.
- Take one thing at a time. If you have an overwhelming amount of things that need your attention, pick one task and work on it. Once you accomplish that task, move on to the next one.
- Make your lifestyle as healthy as possible, by eating nutritious meals, limiting caffeine and alcohol, getting enough rest, exercising regularly, and balancing work and recreation.
- Schedule time to take a break and do things that you enjoy.
- Have family and friends you can turn to for love, support, and guidance.
- Educate yourself about your loved one's condition. Information is empowering.
- Consider joining a support group.
- See your doctor if the stress begins to feel overwhelming.
- Your doctor or a social worker may help you find resources in the community to give you the support you need.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

- National Mental Health Association
800/969-6642
800/433-5959 (TTY) or
www.nmha.org
- Family Caregiver Alliance
415/434-3388
800/445-8106 (in CA) or
www.caregiver.org

INFORM YOURSELF:

To find this and previous *JAMA* Patient Pages, check out the AMA's Web site at www.ama-assn.org/consumer.htm.

Additional Sources: National Mental Health Association, Family Caregiver Alliance, National Family Caregivers Association, National Council on Aging

Mi Young Hwang, Writer

Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor

Jeff Molter, Director of Science News

The JAMA Patient Page is a public service of JAMA and the AMA. The information and recommendations appearing on this page are appropriate in most instances; but they are not a substitute for medical diagnosis. For specific information concerning your personal medical condition, JAMA and the AMA suggest that you consult your physician. This page may be reproduced noncommercially by physicians and other health care professionals to share with patients. Any other reproduction is subject to AMA approval. To purchase bulk reprints, call 212/354-0050.

