



Carers: Looking after your own Health

Caring can be rewarding but it can also be very tiring, placing demands on your physical and emotional energy. As a carer you need to be as healthy as possible. When you are simply coping day to day and responding to the needs of others, it's easy to forget your own health needs.

Research has shown conclusively that caring for others can have a major impact on your health and wellbeing. Carers are significantly more likely to be in poor health - both physical and emotional - than people without caring responsibilities.

There are physical injuries to be aware of, especially your back if you are lifting and moving someone. However the main health risks come from the worry, lack of sleep and depression that caring can bring. Carers often have to fight and battle for the support they get and this wears you down. All this can lead to high blood pressure and stress-related illness.

Carers often put their own needs last. But remember - the better your physical and emotional wellbeing, the better you will be able to cope with the demands of caring.

Getting a good night's sleep

We all need sleep. It is a vital part of our daily life and keeps us healthy, both physically and mentally. Most adults need to sleep for around eight hours a night, although as we get older we tend to sleep less. Occasionally, having a disturbed night will affect you the following day, but if you are having trouble sleeping for longer than a night or two, the effects will be greater.

You may find that you are constantly tired, go to sleep during the day, have trouble concentrating and making decisions, and start feeling depressed. Long-term lack of sleep may also increase your risk of high blood pressure, diabetes and obesity.

Carers can often find it difficult to have a good night's sleep, especially if the person you care for needs help or disturbs you in the night. Caring for someone brings extra pressures, such as money worries, emotional worry, isolation, and having no time to yourself. All of these can contribute to stress, which can make it hard to get to sleep, and keep you awake at night.

Self-help

These tips may help you improve your sleeping habits:

- Make sure your bedroom is comfortable - not too hot, cold or noisy.
- Try not to work or have your computer or TV in your bedroom.
- Get some regular exercise - swimming and walking are ideal - but try not to do this too near to bedtime as it may keep you awake.
- Take a look at your mattress. It should be firm enough to support you comfortably, but not so firm that you feel perched on top of it. You should try to replace your bed every 10 years so that it maintains maximum support and comfort.
- Try to cut down on tea and coffee in the evening.
- Try not to eat or drink a lot late at night - have your evening meal earlier if you can.
- Don't drink too much alcohol. It may help you fall asleep, but makes you more likely to wake up in the middle of the night.
- Spend some time relaxing before you go to bed - a warm bath may help. There are many different relaxation techniques. You could try tapes and books available in your local library or you could join a class.
- Try to keep a regular pattern of going to bed and rising at the same time every day, even if you are not tired
- Keep a notepad by your bed so that if you are worried about something, you can write it down and be ready to deal with it the next day.

- If you still cannot sleep, try not to lie there worrying. Get up and do something you find relaxing like reading, watching TV or listening to quiet music. After a while you may feel tired enough to go to bed again.

Treatment

Whilst the tips listed above may help with sleeping problems, if sleeplessness becomes intolerable, a visit to your GP may help.

It is particularly important to see your GP if you are suffering with stress, anxiety or any physical ailment, so that you can start getting treatment. Even just talking to your GP may help ease your worries. Knowing that someone is taking your concerns seriously does make a difference and can help you to sleep better.

Contact the carer support groups in your area. They may be able to offer sitting services, respite care and emotional support, all of which may help you feel less stressed, and help you get a better night's sleep.

Remember to talk to your family and friends. The people who care about you will want to know if you are struggling and they can offer support and friendship.

Caring for your back

Most of us will suffer back pain at some stage of our lives. But as a carer, you're even more likely to be affected. Lifting the person you care for and helping them dress or move around can all place a strain on your back. However, knowing how to protect your back can help to keep it in good shape.

Improve your posture

Poor posture can put you at increased risk of back problems by putting extra strain on your back. This can affect your muscles, ligaments, tendons and vertebrae, and in the long term, can cause painful problems such as muscle, joint and disc damage, and constricted vessels and nerves.

Just being aware of how you are sitting and standing can greatly improve your posture. You should stand upright with your head facing forward and your back straight. And when sitting, make sure you are upright, with your knees and hips level and your feet flat on the floor or on a footstool. Don't hunch your shoulders or slump in your chair. When sitting down for long periods of time, be sure to keep your back well supported using the back of your chair.

Keep active

Swimming, yoga, Pilates, walking, running and cycling can all help to strengthen your back. If you don't have time to do a regular sport, simple changes to your daily activities can really make a difference - walking instead of using the car for short journeys, cycling to the shops, taking the stairs instead of the lift or getting off the bus a stop earlier than you usually do.

If it's been a long time since you've exercised, or if you're thinking about increasing the amount of exercise you do, discuss it with your GP first, especially if you have any health problems.

If you already have back problems it doesn't need to stop you from being active altogether. Exercises which focus on flexibility, such as yoga or tai-chi might be beneficial - but check with your GP first. These tips may also help reduce your discomfort:

- Try to lose weight if you're overweight
- Try not to make sudden movements
- Wear flat shoes, with cushioned soles, as this can reduce the stress on your back.

Treatment for back pain

- There are two types of back pain: acute back pain, which comes on suddenly and lasts less than three months; and chronic back pain, which develops slowly, lasts more than 12 weeks, and causes long-term problems.

- Acute back pain can often be treated with over-the-counter drugs such as paracetamol or an anti-inflammatory drug like ibuprofen but some people mustn't take these if they are taking particular other types of medication or have particular health conditions, so if in doubt please consult your GP. If these do not help with the discomfort, your GP might prescribe a stronger painkiller to take alongside them, such as codeine. For severe pain, your GP might prescribe a muscle relaxant.
- In some cases, a compression pack may help. Some people find it helps to alternate between hot and cold. You can buy these or, as a homemade alternative, use a hot water bottle or a pack of frozen peas wrapped in a towel. Hold the compression pack against the painful part of your back.
- Chronic back pain is often treated initially with pain killers and exercise. You should speak to your GP regarding a suitable exercise plan. Your GP may also refer you to a physiotherapist, or in certain cases, for surgery. Other options for treatment include complementary therapies, such as osteopathy, acupuncture and chiropractic.

Courtesy of www.carersuk.org