



CANCERcare®

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fact sheet

# COPING WITH THE STRESS OF CAREGIVING

**Stress develops whenever you start to feel that your responsibilities are greater than the time, energy or other resources you have to meet them. So it's no wonder that stress is very common among caregivers of people coping with cancer who face so many competing demands. Finding ways to manage stress can help you feel better, protect your health and make you better equipped to care for your loved one.**

## WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF STRESS ON CAREGIVERS?

Research shows that the stress of caregiving can take a serious toll on your emotional and physical health. Emotional effects tend to show up first. You may feel worried, anxious or irritable—more likely to snap or overreact to things that might not normally bother you. It's important to seek support early so you can do your best to manage these effects.

Physical symptoms of caregiver stress may include tension, headaches, sleep problems and weight changes. Long-term stress has been found to suppress the immune system. This increases your chances of developing chronic health problems, such as heart disease or high blood pressure. You may also experience a worsening of existing health conditions.



## HOW CAN I MANAGE MY STRESS?

Feeling stressed and overwhelmed is not a sign that you're failing as a caregiver. But, since stress can affect your health, it is important to find ways to manage it. Here are some coping tips:

**Educate yourself.** Learning as much as you can about your loved one's cancer, how it's treated and what resources are available to you can help reduce uncertainty and stress.

**Ask for help with medical tasks.** Caregivers can feel unprepared to provide the medical care their loved one needs at home. If there are responsibilities you are unsure about, discuss them with the members of your loved one's health care team. Make sure you understand their instructions, and write them down so you don't forget what you need to do. Find out who you can call with any questions that come up.

**Get support.** Consider speaking directly with a nurse, doctor or pharmacist about your concerns. One-on-one conversations can help keep things simple, provide reassurance and give you information tailored to your needs.

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**Ask friends and family to pitch in.** One of the quickest ways to reduce your stress is to cut back on the number of things you need to do yourself. Make a list of all the tasks or responsibilities you have and cross off any that can be put off until a later time. Next, decide which tasks must be done by you and which could be done by someone else, such as preparing meals or giving your loved one a ride. Then, ask other people for help with those tasks. It is not a sign of weakness to ask for help; you will likely find that others want to help but just need some guidance.

**Eat healthy.** Sometimes it may be easiest to grab fast food or to skip a meal, but don't make this a habit. Strive to eat balanced meals regularly. A diet that consists mostly of plant-based foods is best. Include plenty of fruits and vegetables.

**Exercise.** Working out is one of the best things you can do to stay healthy and keep up your stamina. Experts recommend doing 30 minutes of an activity that gets your heart rate up (such as walking briskly or jogging) four to five times a week and exercises that help maintain flexibility, such as yoga or Pilates, one to two times a week.

**Get plenty of rest.** Practice good sleeping habits by taking time to wind down and relax before bedtime, and try to get six to eight hours of sleep per night. Practicing relaxation techniques and deep-breathing exercises can also help reduce stress.

**Keep up with your own doctor's appointments and medications.** Make sure you get regular checkups from your primary care physician and for any health conditions you may have. Stay on track with your medications and recommended cancer screenings such as mammograms and colonoscopies.

**Find someone to open up to.** Don't keep your emotions bottled up. Sharing your feelings with someone you trust—your partner, sibling, another family member, friend, spiritual leader or social worker—can make your concerns seem more manageable. Caregiver support groups are also available both in-person and online. These can give you an opportunity to meet and learn from others in similar situations.



### **CancerCare® Can Help**

Founded in 1944, CancerCare is the leading national organization providing free support services and information to help people manage the emotional, practical and financial challenges of cancer. Our comprehensive services include counseling and support groups over the phone, online and in-person, educational workshops, publications and financial and co-payment assistance. All CancerCare services are provided by master's-prepared oncology social workers and world-leading cancer experts.

To learn more, visit [www.cancercares.org](http://www.cancercares.org) or call **800-813-HOPE (4673)**.

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