



Caring for the Caregivers

The number of Americans caring for older loved ones is on the rise and will keep growing as the U.S. population ages. Memory loss from Alzheimer's disease or dementia can make care plans even more complex. Caregivers should take time for themselves for their own mental health.

A growing need

A 2020 study from the National Alliance for Caregiving and the American Association of Retired Persons found more than 1 in 5 Americans (21.3 percent) had cared for an adult or child with special needs at some point in the past year. This adds up to about 53 million adults, up from 43.5 million when the same study was done in 2015.

The study also shows a decline in well-being in adults who care for others. About 42 percent of those who care for people ages 50 and up rate their health as "excellent" or "very good." That's down from 48 percent in 2015. About 20 percent say their health is "fair" or "poor," up from 17 percent in 2015.

High stress levels

Long-term caregivers often have higher stress levels than other people. This can cause a range of physical and mental health problems. They include things such as anxiety, depression, a weakened immune system, obesity, a higher risk for chronic diseases like cancer and diabetes, and short-term memory problems.

The Office on Women's Health (OWH) offers tips for caregivers who feel overwhelmed. The OWH says you can ask your employer about taking an unpaid leave of absence. The Family and Medical Leave Act lets qualified employees take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave each year to take care of family members.

OWH also suggests you:

- Take caregiving classes through your local agency on aging.
- Find support in your community, such as respite care.
- Ask for help from family and friends.
- Take care of your health by exercising, eating right and getting checkups.

Dealing with memory loss

About one-third of people taking care of someone over 65 say their loved one is dealing with Alzheimer's or dementia. This is a 5 percent increase from 2015. Experts offer these tips for taking care of someone with signs of memory loss:

- Be patient and flexible.
- Keep new information simple. Use step-by-step instructions for new tasks.
- Offer verbal cues. Say "We're going to church for Easter today" rather than "Remember where we're going today?"
- Keep up daily routines.
- Write down key updates, such as "Billy is coming home from college on Saturday."

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Staying social

Among care recipients ages 65 and up who don't live in assisted living, about 37 percent live alone. That brings its own set of risk factors for physical and mental health. Researchers have found loneliness can put people at greater risk for heart disease, obesity, anxiety, depression, high blood pressure, cognitive decline and even death.

Experts say there are many ways to boost social connection. Older adults can:

- Serve as mentors to younger people.
- Use social media and video calls to stay in touch with family and friends who live far away.
- Volunteer with civic groups.

There are many resources that can help caregivers and the people they care for. The key for caregivers: Don't forget to take care of yourself, too.

The National Alliance for Caregiving, the American Association of Retired Persons and the Office on Women's Health are independent organizations that offer health information you might find helpful.

