

Caring for you

Looking after yourself when you are a carer

Most carers would agree – caring can be hard work, both mentally and physically. Sometimes everything seems to focus on the person you are caring for and it can be easy to ignore your own needs and to forget that you matter too. Recognising that taking care of *yourself* is better for everybody is an important first step. Trying to get help when needed, looking after your diet, getting regular exercise and aiming to maintain your social contacts and lifestyle are key elements too.

It helps to talk

Caring can be rewarding but it can also bring feelings of sadness, anger and resentment. Even though you love someone it's important to recognise that there may be times when you have negative feelings – this is perfectly normal. Carers can feel isolated and it's important to be able to speak to someone.

You may want to talk to:

- **Your friends and family** Sometimes carers are reluctant to talk about the demands of their role in case others think they are struggling to cope. Don't turn down offers – most people will welcome a request for help with a specific task. Help with shopping or sitting with the person you are caring for could also provide a regular social contact for you. Let others know if your role has become more difficult.
- **GPs and other professionals** It's important to tell your GP you're a carer and that this information is recorded on your notes. GPs can be a valuable source of support – maybe providing regular health checks, including free annual flu jabs and covid booster jabs (now available for any carers aged 16 and over). Your practice may offer some flexibility with appointments or be more willing to make home visits. Your GP could provide information and advice to help you with caring – if the person you care for is in the same practice, working together to provide care will be easier.
- **Local carers' organisations and support groups** An organisation like Carers' Resource has understanding, experienced staff with whom you can talk freely and in confidence. They offer information on any aspect of your caring role and if necessary, signpost you to other sources of help and support relevant to you or the person you care for. The organisation has groups and events for carers. Details are listed in our *Choices* newsletter, published four times a year.
- **National support organisations** Carers UK and Carers Trust are dedicated to carers' welfare - their services include helplines and carers' blogs. Carers' Resource can provide contact details of all national organisations which support people with specific conditions and their carers. Most blogs operate 24/7 so there's a chance to 'get things off your chest' if you're feeling low at any time.



- **Social care services** can assess your needs as a carer so that services to help you can be identified and put into place – see *Your right to support* on page 3.

Staying healthy

Eat well

A good, well-balanced diet will not only give you the energy you need to carry on caring, it will also boost your immune system and reduce your risk of falling ill. If the person you are caring for has a poor appetite, you may be less enthusiastic about your own food.

Though it's not necessary to eat three full meals a day, taking time out to enjoy a nutritious snack and looking forward to a tasty meal can make a difference.

Even if you have previously made all meals from scratch, using fresh ingredients, it may be time to think about saving time and energy by using more convenience foods. Frozen or tinned foods and ready-meals can be just as nutritious. Finding time to shop and cook may be difficult. Meal or grocery delivery services could also be considered. Carers' Resource can provide information about these services.

For a healthy diet, your daily intake should include foods from four main groups:

- **Starchy foods** - breads, cereals, potatoes, pasta, rice – wholemeal, if possible
- **Dairy foods or dairy alternatives** – milk, yoghurt, cheese, soya or other
- **Proteins** – meat, poultry, fish, eggs, beans and pulses
- **Fruit and vegetables** – try to eat five portions a day - fruit juice can count as one of those portions

Drink plenty of fluids, the NHS recommends 6 to 8 glasses a day. Water, lower fat milk and sugar-free drinks, including tea and coffee, all count.

Sleep

Many carers have difficulty in getting a good night's sleep. They may have to get up because the person they care for needs attention or they may be unable to relax because of problems relating to caring, family, work... Just the feeling that you *may* be needed during the night can keep you awake.

Constant lack of sleep can make it much harder to cope and may affect your mental health. If lack of sleep becomes an ongoing problem it may be time to consider extra help. Speak to your GP or social care services – you may need to have an assessment or re-assessment of your needs and those of the person you are looking after.

Exercise

Exercises at home or a walk in the fresh air can boost your energy and lift your mood. Try not to give up any physical activities or sports you've previously enjoyed.

Watch your back!

If you have to provide physical support – help with lifting, walking or bathing – always look after your back. Find out if adaptations or equipment could make life easier for you and the person you care for. Professional advice from an occupational therapist can help you select appropriate items. Some essential items such as handrails may be fitted free of charge or you may be eligible for a grant towards the cost of adapting a home. Social care services, your GP surgery or Carers' Resource can provide further information.



Making time for yourself

Try to organise regular breaks for yourself and to keep up with activities you enjoy. This can of course be harder if you are caring on your own or if you feel you are the only person able to do the caring. Maybe the person you are caring for refuses to let anyone else help.

If the person you are caring for cannot be left alone, a solution needs to be found because having time to yourself is important.

Friends and relatives need to know how much you need a break and provide support if they are in a position to do so. There are organisations which provide sitting services and longer term care. You may also need to find out about respite care and funding to enable you to take a break. Further information can be found in our factsheet: *Taking a break from caring*.

Your right to support

The Care Act 2014 brought important new rights for carers.

- All carers have the same right to a free assessment of their needs and to support as the person they are caring for, regardless of the amount of care provided or financial resources.
- If you have been refused an assessment in the past because you did not meet the eligibility criteria, you can request another assessment.
- The Care Act states that an assessment must take into account the needs of the whole family. If everyone is in agreement, assessments for the carer and the person they are caring for can be carried out at the same time.
- Carers can have an assessment, even if the 'cared for' refuses an assessment of their needs.
- An assessment provides an opportunity for you to discuss in detail your caring role and the support/services you may need.
- The assessment must take into account your wishes relating to your job, any training or education which you want to pursue as well as your leisure activities.
- Following an assessment, you will be given information about the services and support which could make life easier for you. Such help is usually means-tested and you may have to pay some, or all, of the costs yourself.
- If the local authority is paying, they may provide a service directly to you but you are also entitled to ask for *direct payments* so that you can make your own arrangements. *Direct payments* can be used in a variety of ways to pay for services such as respite care or home help. If necessary, your local authority can provide help with managing *direct payments* – although you have freedom to arrange your own services, you also have the responsibility of being an 'employer' and this can be daunting.

Money



- Finances may be a problem, particularly if you have given up work to become a carer. There is a range of benefits, including Carer's Allowance, tax credits and other financial support you may be able to receive as a carer.

These are explained in Carers' Resource factsheet:

Finding out about financial help

Ask at your local Jobcentre Plus or visit www.gov.uk for details of benefits which you and the person you are looking after may be eligible.

- Following a carer's assessment there should also be an assessment of your financial situation to decide on how any services you may need are to be paid for.
- As a carer, you may need to look after the finances of the person you are caring for. This could involve both day-to-day management and planning for the future.

You may find our factsheets helpful:

Helping someone to manage their financial affairs

Lasting Power of Attorney

Juggling work with caring

Many carers struggle to manage the demands of caring and their work commitments. You may feel that leaving your job is the only solution but do consider the implications:

- Would you be able to manage with less money? Investigate your future financial status before making a decision.
- Would you miss the social side of work?
- Would you lose out on pension or other entitlements?
- What would happen if you wanted to return to work? Would you have to re-train?

There may be ways round the problem:

- Talking to your employer – you may be able to make mutually agreeable changes to your working pattern. Employers are usually keen to retain skilful, experienced employees. Human Resources and unions may be able to advise here.
- Making a request for flexible working. From June 2014 all employees have a legal right to request flexible working providing they have been in post for 26 weeks continuously – it may be turned down but an employer must be able to provide a sound reason for such a decision.
- Taking time off - paid or unpaid leave, to cope with a crisis or to consider your position long-term. A formally arranged 'carer break' may help you.
- Eligible employees can take unpaid parental leave for a total period of 18 weeks to look after a child under 18. Each parent can take up to 4 weeks parental leave in a year for each child. This must be taken as whole weeks unless your child is disabled. Employees must have been with the same company for at least 12 months.
- Contact social care services to enquire about arranging extra help.
- Making your own arrangements for extra care – sitting services or home help, for example.

Juggling work with caring *continued*



Remember too, that you are legally entitled to have your needs relating to employment, training or education considered as part of a carer's assessment.

Further information can be found in Carers' Resource factsheet: *Caring and Working*.

If you would like copies of factsheets, need further information or would like to discuss any aspect of your caring role, please contact Carers' Resource:

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We can provide this information in another format. Please contact us to discuss your requirements.

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