

Caregiving: Takes a toll

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Some 2.5 million of the 44 million U.S. caregivers sacrifice their own physical and mental health taking care of elderly parents. They suffer from depression, fatigue, financial hardship, poor eating habits and a lack of exercise, and some self-medicate with prescription drugs and alcohol, a study reveals. Ninety-one percent of the 528 of U.S. caregivers surveyed -- all in fair/poor health -- suffer from depression, according to a study released by Evercare, a provider of health plans for people who have chronic or advanced illness, and the National Alliance for Caregiving.

Ninety percent say they worry more or feel more stress now than they did prior to becoming caregivers, and 87 percent of the respondents cited lack of energy/sleep, 60 percent reported pain or aching, and 38 percent reported weight gain or loss. The sad thing is that no one really cares. I have interviewed hundreds of politicians, policymakers, church officials and non-profit groups and I am always told the same thing: The American system is based on personal responsibility, and each family is responsible for taking care of their relatives.

As a result, if a caregiver chooses his or her parents incorrectly -- genes that include cancer, heart disease, diabetes or Alzheimer's disease -- then a family caregiver can expect to spend several years -- the average is about 4 years -- caregiving for a spouse or a relative to the point that their health, finances, career and family life suffer.

This system of personal responsibility does not call on the government to help in the macro sense or call on the neighbor to pick up a prescription for a caregiver, so there is very little help for a caregiver unless he or she can afford to pay for services. "Although the number of caregivers seems large -- and certainly the number of caregivers increases each year -- those doing the most and whose health is suffering the most does number in the millions, they don't have a very strong voice to start this conversation that much entail the public and private sectors," Sherri Snelling, Evercare director of caregiving services, told UPI's Caregiving.

Trying to juggle one's job, home and own health is tough enough for most people, but once a caregiver combines these responsibilities with negotiating the healthcare system with the daily stress and physical demands of caregiving -- something has to give, and it is usually the sleep and health of the caregiver.

The study found because of caregiver stress, 10 percent of respondents reported increased misuse of prescription drugs or alcohol and 51 percent report taking more medications. More than 80 percent say that their sleeping habits are worse than before, while 63 percent say their eating habits and 58 percent say their exercising habits are worse than before.

"This is the first national study to take an in-depth look at the impact of caregiving on caregivers' own health and wellness and raises important issues about caregiver health as baby boomers age and caregiving becomes a public health issue," Snelling said.

"Because of the time and attention needed by the care recipient, 50 percent of caregivers are neglecting their own personal health."

"Fifty percent of the study participants said they were neglecting their own personal health", Snelling said. "We had focus groups and many neglected dental appointments -- one woman lost three teeth because she couldn't make it to the dentist-- and with no time to get their own health attended to many felt more ill than the people they were caring for."

For a caregiver, sleep is the first thing to go, followed by an increase in stress level. Forty-one percent had more headaches, 27 percent had increase in blood pressure, and 22 percent had digestive problems, the study found.

In addition, there are physical problems: Just like nurses who experience back pain moving and helping patients, family caregivers experience increased back trouble the more their care involves moving and lifting the care recipient.

Lifestyle Factors that Increase Stroke Risk

SMOKING:

Smoking doubles stroke risk! It damages blood vessel walls, speeds up the clogging of arteries by deposits, raises blood pressure, and makes the heart work harder.

ALCOHOL:

Excessive consumption of alcohol is associated with stroke in a small number of research studies. Its specific role in stroke has not yet been determined or proven. Recent studies have also suggested that modest alcohol consumption (one 4oz. Glass of wine or the alcoholic equivalent) may protect against stroke by raising levels of a naturally occurring "clot-buster" in the blood.

WEIGHT:

Excess weight puts a strain on the entire circulatory system. It also makes people more likely to have other risk factors such as high cholesterol, high blood pressure, and diabetes.

American Stroke Association
www.strokeassociation.org

National Stroke Association
www.stroke.org

American Heart Association
www.americanheart.org

Did You Know???

Every 45 seconds, someone in America has a stroke! About 700,000 Americans will have a stroke this year. Stroke is the nation's No. 3 killer and the leading cause of severe, long-term disability.



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