

Family Caregivers and Chronic Illness: How to Help Your Loved One and Yourself

Today, many family caregivers and their families are facing the challenges of dealing with chronic illness (also known as long-term illness), which includes conditions such as heart disease, asthma, high blood pressure, diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, and lung disease.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services more than 125 million people suffer from at least one chronic illness and the Centers for Disease Control estimates that chronic illness affects the quality of life of 90 million people¹. Managing one chronic illness is difficult enough but almost half of those with chronic illness suffer from more than one type of disease or condition.

That is why it is important for family caregivers to understand chronic illnesses, how to manage them, and how to reduce their own risk for these conditions.

A recent [study conducted by Evercare®](#) found that only 34 percent of friends and family are willing to give health advice to a loved one with a chronic illness. For many of these chronically ill patients, family caregivers are their principal source of support. However, caring for people with one or more chronic illnesses presents some difficult challenges. Additionally, caregivers often must navigate a health care system that, unfortunately, is not designed to manage chronic long-term illnesses. That means struggling to coordinate doctors, managing multiple prescription medications, monitoring for changes in conditions, and more.

And, studies have shown that caregivers are nearly twice as likely as the general population to develop multiple chronic illnesses themselves due to stress and neglect of their own health and well-being².

Understanding how to manage these illnesses with your loved one is an important task for caregivers. Here are some tips to get you started. :

Understand your loved one's goals. Talk to your friends or loved ones with chronic illness to help understand their goals. Get the conversation started by discussing events or activities that they used to participate in and miss or something in the future they would like to be a part of, such as attending a family reunion. You can help your friends or loved ones meet these goals by discussing them with their health care providers, doctors or community service agencies.

Speak in their "language." Your loved ones may be put off by your advice if they think that you are speaking *at* them and not *with* them. Try and put yourself in their shoes and talk to them in a way that's likely to encourage a positive reaction. Use terms or examples that will have meaning to them, listen to their answers to your questions, and pay close attention to their non-verbal reaction. You might want to try providing neutral examples, such as, "I read that some

¹ National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, *Chronic Disease Overview*, at <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/overview.htm>. Accessed October 17, 2007.

² Commonwealth Fund, *A Population at Risk*, at http://www.caregiver.org/caregiver/jsp/content_node.jsp?nodeid=1822#52. Accessed October 17, 2007

people with heart failure have trouble checking their weight every day. We could make a pact to make sure we weigh ourselves every day.”

Appoint an ambassador. Think carefully about the friend or family member your loved ones with chronic illness feel most comfortable speaking with and respect enough to heed his or her advice. Ask that person to serve as an unofficial “ambassador” to discuss your loved ones’ condition and to help manage it.

Tag Team. Having someone attend doctor’s appointments with your loved ones can not only be comforting to them, but can also be very helpful in terms of providing a second pair of ears to pick up on medication and other instructions from the doctor. If you do accompany your loved ones to their appointments, it is a good idea to have them take all of their medications (in the containers) along to the doctor appointment. It’s also helpful to write down questions for the doctor so you are ready for the appointment.

Develop a health journal. Another great way to start the conversation about your loved ones’ health is to help them create a personal health journal. Include vital information such as doctors’ contact numbers, regular blood sugar level, oxygen use, and symptoms or health changes to monitor, like weight or blood pressure. This tool will allow you both to remain proactive with their condition as well as have information at the ready for health professionals when treatment is necessary.

Improve your own comfort level. Some people feel that they need to be a trained health professional in order to help loved ones with a chronic condition. While it is true that you should never try to take the place of a primary care physician, you may have something the professionals do not...the trust of your loved ones. By educating yourself about your loved ones’ conditions, you will feel more comfortable speaking with them about it and reinforcing the advice they have received from their doctors. For instance, caregivers of those with diabetes should regularly check their loved ones’ feet – often diabetes sufferers lose feeling in their feet and may not be aware of a sore, cut or other problem that can be of concern.

Make the home safe. Look for things in their environment that might cause your loved ones harm such as loose area rugs, loose steps or missing/faulty handrails for someone who has trouble walking. For loved ones with high blood pressure or heart disease, stairs can cause them trouble breathing, so think about moving their living environment to the ground floor if they live in a multi-story home.

Maintain your own health. Since studies show that family caregivers are twice as likely to develop their own chronic illness due to the neglect of their own health, maintaining a healthy diet, exercise routine, doctor visits and well-being activities are essential so that you can continue to be there for your loved ones.

These tips were developed by expert Nurse Practitioners and Care Managers from Evercare®

Visit EvercareHealthPlans.com to read more about the Chronic Illness Survey and to find out more about chronic illness and caregiver support services and programs.

