



CANCERcare®

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# 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 that you have to meet them. It is no wonder, then, that stress is so 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 the emotional and physical health of caregivers. Emotional effects tend to show up first. You may feel worried and anxious, for example, or irritable – more likely to snap or overreact to things that might not normally bother you. It's important to seek support early.



Early 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 are somehow failing as a caregiver. But since stress can affect your health, it is important to find ways manage it. Here are some coping tips:

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

**Obtain help with medical tasks.** Many caregivers report feeling unprepared to provide the medical care their loved one needs at home. If there is any responsibility you are unsure about, discuss it 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 one-on-one support.** Online research can be beneficial, but the amount of information you find can be overwhelming. Consider speaking directly with a nurse, doctor, or pharmacist about your concerns. One-on-one conversation 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. Then, ask other people for help with those tasks. It is not a sign of weakness to need help – you will find that others want to help but just need some guidance.



**Eat nourishing meals.** 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 doing 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 medication.** 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, other family member, friend, clergy person, or social worker – can make your concerns seem more manageable. Caregiver support groups are also available. These can give you an opportunity to meet and learn from others in similar situations.

### About CancerCare

CancerCare is a national nonprofit organization that helps people better cope with the emotional and practical challenges arising from a cancer diagnosis. CancerCare's free services include individual counseling, support groups, educational workshops, publications and financial help.

### About MyCancerCircle.net

CancerCare, in collaboration with Boehringer Ingelheim Pharmaceuticals, Inc. is proud to announce MyCancerCircle.net, a free, private, online community of support for families and caregivers of people facing cancer. Visit [www.MyCancerCircle.net](http://www.MyCancerCircle.net) for more information and to create your own community of support.

To learn more about how CancerCare helps, call us at **800-813-HOPE (4673)** or visit [www.cancercare.org](http://www.cancercare.org).

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