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## **Caregiving Can Be Hazardous to Your Health**

A study of caregivers by a research team at Ohio State University Medical Center proved that “stress can kill you.” The research team, led by Dr. Janice Kiecolt-Glaser,<sup>1</sup> conducted a 6-year study of elderly people who cared for spouses with Alzheimer’s Disease. The study not only found a significant decline in the health of the caregivers when compared to a similar group of non-caregivers, but also found that the caregivers had a much higher death rate.

The demands on a caregiver result in enormous stress. The study found that stress creates physiological changes in the human body. Providing supervision or physical assistance during many hours a week, and over a period of years, is extremely stressful. This type of stress often occurs day after day, week after week. Its long-term effects are more pronounced in middle-aged and older people -- precisely the group that most often provides long-term care to loved ones. In younger people, when the cause of stress lessens or disappears, the body returns to normal fairly quickly. But as we age, the body’s reaction to stress lingers. Over a period of time, it impairs the immune system and results in early aging, development of debilitating disease and even early death. Stress can even induce illness and depression. Depression in caregivers is far more prevalent than in the non-caregiving population. This can further decrease the effectiveness of the caregiver, leading to higher frustration and greater levels of stress.

Prolonged stress has been linked to cardiovascular disease, type II diabetes, frequent viral infections, intestinal, stomach and colon disorders, osteoporosis, periodontal disease, various cancers and auto immune disorders such as lupus, rheumatoid arthritis and multiple sclerosis. Alzheimer’s, dementia, nerve damage and mental problems are also linked to stress. Wounds heal more slowly, vaccinations are less likely to be effective, and recovery from infectious disease can be impaired. For these reasons, it is important to implement strategies to reduce caregiver stress:

**Ask for help.** Most caregivers are reluctantly thrust into their role without preparation because the need for care usually comes with little warning. Caregivers often operate in “crisis” mode - arranging medical care and living arrangements, scheduling substitute caregivers, providing meals and performing household chores. Ironically, caregivers often sever ties with family, friends and support groups just when help from these people is most needed. As a caregiver, you must ask for help. If it’s difficult to ask for help yourself, use an advocate - a sibling, friend or professional care manager.

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<sup>1</sup> Reported in the June 30, 2003 issue of Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

**Seek care management advice.** Non-medical home care companies provide paid aides to help with activities such as bathing, dressing, shopping, household chores, transportation, companionship and much more. You may wish to seek a formal assessment and care plan from a professional geriatric care manager. Care managers are invaluable in that they are often able to find supporting resources, suggest respite alternatives, refer to adult daycare or other community services, make arrangements with family or government providers and provide advice on other issues with which a caregiver struggles.

**Take time off - find temporary substitutes.** Taking a break from caregiving is just as important as taking a break at work or taking that long-awaited vacation. A geriatric care manager can offer viable options or arrangements can be made with family or friends.

**Look to fund future care arrangements for you or for a *healthy* parent NOW.** The analysis of data from three national surveys (Mature Market Institute, National Alliance for Caregiving and LifePlans, Inc.) demonstrates that employees caring for disabled elders who have long-term care insurance are nearly two times more likely to be able to continue working than those caring for non-insured relatives. In addition, the group with insurance devoted more “quality time,” more companionship, and less “hands-on assistance” than the group without. Inquire as to whether your healthy parent can still purchase insurance. If insurance is unaffordable, perhaps other family members might contribute. There may be other avenues for funding long-term care insurance.

**Use assistive technology.** There are a number of technological devices that can help you make sure your loved-ones are safe while you are away. Such things as emergency alert bracelets and pendants, GPS tracking for wanderers, remote video surveillance, tele-homecare, and sensory augmentation help monitor from afar.

**Remove non-caregiving stress from your job or at home.** Take some time to analyze ways in which to remove or reduce other stress causing factors in your life. This will make it easier to cope with the stress of caregiving.