

Taking care of yourself

Keeping healthy as a carer

We know that being a carer can be hard work. There are so many demands on your time every day that it can be difficult to find time for yourself. That stress can build up, so looking after yourself is important when you're a carer. Keeping well reduces the risk of you being unable to look after someone due to a problem with your own health.

But no one can plan for every eventuality, and we all get ill sometimes. Here we provide some ideas for keeping well, and the rest of this section gives some positive steps that carers can take to look after their own well being.

Healthy diet

Eating well is a vital part of looking after yourself. A balanced diet includes at least five different portions of fruit and vegetables a day. These can be fresh, frozen and tinned.



Starchy foods such as bread, cereals, potatoes, pasta and rice are also vital. About a third of your diet should consist of starchy foods. Choose wholegrain bread or cereal as these are higher in fibre and nutrients such as B vitamins, calcium and iron.

Cut back on salt and sugar. The same goes for saturated fats and 'trans fats'. They can push up your cholesterol level and increase your risk of heart disease. Unsaturated fats, on the other hand, can reduce your cholesterol levels and provide you with essential fatty acids.

Exercise

Exercise is vital for your physical and mental health. It helps you deal with stress and makes you feel better emotionally. Physical activity also helps to make your heart stronger, keeps you supple, and reduces all sorts of health risks. Walking, swimming, housework, gardening and even walking upstairs can make a difference.



Ideally, you should take 30 minutes of moderate exercise five or more days a week. That means you should feel warmer and breathe more heavily than usual. If you haven't taken any exercise recently, build up slowly. And if you have any existing health problems, ask your GP for advice before you start.

Sleep

If you're looking after someone who needs a lot of care, are combining caring with a job, or are feeling depressed, you probably aren't getting enough sleep. This in turn can make it harder to cope, and it can further affect your mental health. If you're having trouble sleeping, try to take some exercise during the day, as this can help. Relaxation exercises can also help. Sit comfortably in a quiet place, close your eyes and concentrate on breathing slowly and deeply. As you breathe, tense and then relax each part of your body in turn until you have gone from your toes to your head.



If you can't sleep because the person you care for wakes you, you may need to get extra help. Talk to the local authority of the person you're looking after, and it will either assess your needs and the needs of the person you're caring for, or look again at any assessments that have been done in the past.

Tell people

If you are struggling to manage, are feeling isolated or down, let your family and friends know.

A break from caring. Your main obstacle to looking after yourself may well be finding the time to exercise, think about your diet or have some time to yourself. If you're unable to leave the person you care for unattended, you will need to organise some alternative care for them. See the Time off section in NHS Choices links for more information on this.



Would you like to improve your health?

We have recently started a Healthy Carers Group. Why not come along and join in with other carers who want to make changes to their lifestyles and improve their health.

For more information about the Healthy Carers Group contact us on 020 7708 4497

Keeping well at work

Around half the UK's six million carers combine work with caring. However, caring for someone can sometimes be unpredictable, and complex arrangements often have to be made.

Apart from the financial need to work, carers often choose to work as a way of focusing on something else, and enjoy the emotional and mental wellbeing that comes from having a job.



It's important that you keep well while working in order to continue in your caring role. Working and caring can sometimes cause health problems. Common health

problems for carers include:

- Back injury.
- Anxiety.
- Isolation and low self-esteem.

Here are a few simple techniques that can help you to stay well at work:

- Try to have a good night's rest. Many work-related accidents are caused by employees being too tired.
- Try to follow a healthy diet. Healthy eating helps to maintain the body's immune system.
- Try to fit in exercise around your work. Walk part of the way to work, avoid the lift and take the stairs and get up from your desk and walk around every now and then.
- Have lunch away from your desk. A change of scenery helps to maintain a sense of mental balance.
- Go for a walk. Fresh air and a 20-minute walk during the day in a local park or green space can make you feel less stressed.
- Have ordinary conversations with your work colleagues. Having a laugh every now and then not only boosts your blood flow but can help fight infections and ease pain.
- Join colleagues for lunch or after-work sessions when you can.

You don't have to tell your employer that you're a carer, but many employers now offer a range of help and support to carers because they realise that it benefits them to support carers.

There are many ways in which your employer can

help you keep well at work by reducing the worry and anxiety of being a working carer:

- Flexible working arrangements.
- Time off for emergencies.
- Carers' leave – either paid or unpaid.
- Compassionate leave.
- A career break.

You may wish to discuss your needs with your employer, and find out how best they can help you work and continue caring.

If you're working and caring, getting a carer's assessment for yourself can make a positive difference to your life. The assessment will look at ways in which your local authority can support you. One of its priorities is to enable you to continue working and caring



Further Information



The information in this section is taken from Carers Direct. You can find more information on keeping healthy from them at www.nhs.uk/carersdirect

You can find more information about taking care of yourself at the Princess Royal Trust for Carers website <http://www.carers.org/taking-care-of-yourself,61,TP.html>

You can get information specifically about healthy eating from change4life where you can register for a free information pack www.nhs.uk/change4life

You can get information specifically about free swimming for under 16's and over 60's at <http://www.southwark.gov.uk/YourServices/SportsandLeisure/>

If you suffer from sleep problems and would like some hints on improving your sleep you can get more information from <http://www.insomniacs.co.uk>

For further information on your rights at work <http://www.carers.org/carers-and-employment,100,TP.html>

For more information about living well regardless of your age - including information about healthy eating, exercise, smoking and other health topics - you can visit the specific NHS Choices sites

For men - <http://www.nhs.uk/LiveWell/Men1839/Pages/Men1839.aspx>

For Women - <http://www.nhs.uk/LiveWell/Women1839/Pages/Women1839home.aspx>