



Unseen Health Risks—and Benefits!—for Family Caregivers

By: Andrew Davison

While gathering with relatives and loved ones is one of life's joys, for many family caregivers and their care recipients, the circumstances can be more challenging. Family, or informal, caregivers are unpaid partners, relatives, friends or neighbors who help with daily and/or medical tasks for their loved one with a chronic illness, disability or other challenge. Many people find being a family caregiver rewarding, if difficult. Doctors and researchers have often focused on the negative aspects and risk factors experienced by caregivers, but there is a growing reevaluation of the benefits many family caregivers report.

No Small Task

An estimated 53 million adults, more than 1 in 5 Americans, are family caregivers. This has increased from previous years, and as the American population continues to age, is expected to rise.

Many family caregivers provide care hours equivalent to a part-time job.

On average, caregivers spend 23.7 hours per week providing care. About one in three provides care for 21 hours or more each week and 21 percent report over 41 hours of care each week. Expectedly, those caregivers who live with their recipient reported spending over twice as many hours providing care per week (37.4) than those who did not (14.6).¹

Balancing caregiving with other aspects of life can be difficult. On average, caregivers are around 50 years old, and many are also working, raising children, or both, along with pursuing their own goals and passions.²

Gloom

With something as emotionally intense and time consuming as caregiving, it can be difficult for caregivers to find time to manage stress and maintain their own health. In fact, 41 percent of caregivers report having two or more chronic diseases, and this rises to over half for caregivers aged 65 years and older. A third of caregivers reported having a disability themselves.³ These chronic conditions may include obesity, high cholesterol and high blood pressure. Without proper treatment and regular doctor visits, these conditions can worsen.

Family caregivers may find themselves falling into unhealthy habits.

¹ [AARP](#), "Caregiving in the U.S. 2020"

² [AARP](#), "Caregiving in the U.S. 2020"

³ [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), "Caregiving for Family and Friends – A Public Health Issue"

These habits can lead to or worsen chronic conditions. According to the Family Caregiver Alliance, many caregivers report insufficient sleep, poor eating habits, infrequent exercise, and delayed medical care. Caregivers are also at increased risk of clinical depression.⁴

While reports vary on how caregiving impacts health overall, the health impacts for caregivers tend to worsen according to the amount and duration of care provided and resources available. Many studies have found that caregivers find caregiving emotionally difficult and stressful, and rightfully so. What's harder to determine is how much of this is due to the stress of caregiving and how much is from having a loved one struggling with ill health.⁵

The impact on both physical and mental health is more pronounced for those caring for someone with Alzheimer's or dementia with higher levels of stress and depression for the caregiver. Caring for these individuals often requires vigilance and they are less likely to show appreciation for their caregiver. Despite the caregiver knowing that they are doing what's best, a loved ones' protests and misunderstanding can create a difficult and demoralizing position.⁶

Bloom

While these health concerns are very real, for many, caregiving is not as hopeless or detrimental as it is often presented. Research commonly identifies higher levels of stress in caregivers, but there isn't as much evidence connecting this stress to worse health.⁷ In fact, broader research has found that many caregivers do not experience severe impacts to their mental or physical health and continue to thrive despite the added responsibilities.⁸ Some researchers dispute the commonly cited claim that family caregivers are at increased risk for mortality. They counter that caregiving is actually associated with reduced mortality and *increased* longevity.⁹ One study found that family caregivers had lower five-year mortality rates than non-caregivers.¹⁰

Most family caregivers report experiencing benefits from caregiving.

Many caregivers report little or no negative impact on their life. According to a 2020 AARP Report, 72 percent of caregivers report that caregiving hasn't impacted their health at all, and five percent said it made their health better. Similarly, over three-quarters denied that caregiving made it more difficult to care for their own health.¹¹

Often, caregivers find their role satisfying and fulfilling. Over half reported that caregiving provided a sense of purpose and meaning in their life, and this was even higher for those in higher-intensity or higher-hour care situations.¹² Caregiving also promotes learning new skills and strengthening relationships.¹³

⁴ [Family Caregiver Alliance](#), "Taking Care of YOU: Self-care for Family Caregivers"

⁵ [Gerontologist](#), "Informal Caregiving and Its Impact on Health: A Reappraisal From Population-Based Studies"

⁶ [American Journal of Nursing](#), "Physical and Mental Health Effects of Family Caregiving"

⁷ [American Journal of Nursing](#), "Physical and Mental Health Effects of Family Caregiving"

⁸ [American Psychological Association](#), "Mental and Physical Health Effects of Family Caregiving"

⁹ [Gerontologist](#), "Informal Caregiving and Its Impact on Health: A Reappraisal From Population-Based Studies"

¹⁰ [American Journal of Nursing](#), "Physical and Mental Health Effects of Family Caregiving"

¹¹ [AARP](#), "Caregiving in the U.S. 2020"

¹² [AARP](#), "Caregiving in the U.S. 2020"

¹³ [American Journal of Nursing](#), "Physical and Mental Health Effects of Family Caregiving"

Of course, every caregiving situation is unique, and caregivers are likely to feel differently on different days. Even for those who aren't feeling an impact, maintaining their well-being and preventing burnout should still be top priorities.

Insurance and Benefits Support

Family caregivers feel less stress if they receive support and resources, and some may look to their care recipient's insurance and benefits for help. Unfortunately, typical health insurance policies and Medicare usually do not pay for long-term care expenses. If the care recipient qualifies for Medicaid, they may be able to get help through the In-Home Supportive Services program. Medicaid benefits differ by state, so caregivers should check to see what services are available. Other local resources can be located through the U.S. Administration on Aging's [Eldercare Locator](#).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the caregiving crisis for working adults caring for children, adult relatives or both, and some employers are responding. Employers are increasingly offering child and elder caregiving support including resources and extended leave.

The federal [Family and Medical Leave Act](#) (FMLA) provides certain employees in all states up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave per year to care for themselves, a sick family member (limited to a spouse, child or parent), or a new child without losing their jobs or health care insurance. In addition, some states have laws that expand leave protection. This assistance is limited to short-term situations and would not fully cover long-term care; however, it could prove useful during a sudden change or upcoming procedure that may require additional attentiveness.

Family Caregiver Well-being

The caregiving experience is varied, complex and for so many Americans, an integral and essential part of their lives. Family caregivers are likely to experience both positive and negative impacts from caregiving. What's most important is that they continue to monitor their own well-being. This means practicing self-care, staying socially connected and accepting help when needed. However, only 13 percent of caregivers have had a health care provider ask them about their own care needs.

We should continue to recognize family caregivers and ensure that they have the resources and support to live healthy fulfilling lives while caring for their loved one, but the positive impact caregiving can have for the caregiver should not be ignored.