

# Caregivers of veterans with chronic illnesses often stressed, yet satisfied: study

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Veterans are almost twice as likely as the general public to have chronic illnesses, such as diabetes and heart failure. Therefore, veterans may require more assistance from informal caregivers, especially as outpatient treatment becomes more common. A University of Missouri researcher evaluated strain and satisfaction among informal caregivers of veterans with chronic illnesses. The findings show that more than one third of veterans' caregivers report high levels of strain as a result of taking care of their relatives; yet, on average, caregivers also report being satisfied with their caregiving responsibilities.

Bonnie Wakefield, an associate research professor in the MU Sinclair School of Nursing, says the majority of caregiving responsibilities belong to veterans' immediate family members, often their wives. Of the [caregivers](#) Wakefield surveyed, nearly half reported they felt they had no choice when it came to caring for their [relatives](#).

"Veterans with [chronic illnesses](#) have many care needs that often go unnoticed," said Wakefield. "Caregivers help with those needs, such as cooking meals, managing medications and giving moral support."

Wakefield found that only eight percent of caregivers reported that they had high levels of depression, but nearly one-third of caregivers reported high levels of strain. Caregivers' depression and strain usually resulted from lack of [coping strategies](#) and from caring for veterans with lower self-reported health.

"Having a lot of caregiving demands doesn't necessarily means that caregivers aren't satisfied," Wakefield said. "Some people get satisfaction from [helping others](#)."

Caregivers who reported greater satisfaction tended to have more outside help, such as support from friends and relatives. Also, those with higher satisfaction levels had developed more strategies to cope, such as regular exercise.

Wakefield suggested caregivers seek outside assistance through websites like [www.myhealth.va.gov](http://www.myhealth.va.gov) and [www.caregiver.va.gov](http://www.caregiver.va.gov), websites that provide health information and resources to veterans and their caregivers. She also suggested that clinicians, especially nurses, take time to monitor the caregivers' stress levels and offer concrete suggestions about ways to alleviate stress.

The study, "Strain and Satisfaction in Caregivers of Veterans with Chronic Illness," was published in *Research in Nursing & Health* and was funded by the Department of Veterans Affairs Quality Enhancement Research Initiative (QUERI). Wakefield's coauthors include researchers from the Kansas City Veterans Affairs Medical Center and the MU School of Medicine. Wakefield also is a core investigator for the Center for Comprehensive Access & Delivery Research and Evaluation (CADRE) at the Iowa City VA Health Care System in Iowa City, Iowa.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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