

Caregivers neglect their own health, increasing heart disease risk

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People acting as caregivers for family members with cardiovascular disease may inadvertently increase their own risk for heart disease by neglecting their own health, according to a new study in the *American Journal of Health Promotion*.

"Our research shows that the potential increased risk posed by caregiving may be associated with [lifestyle habits](#) such as [poor diet](#) and decreased physical activity. And those with the highest level of strain from caregiving were at higher risk," said Lori Mosca, M.D., professor of medicine and director of preventive cardiology at Columbia Medical Center in New York.

In addition to the fact that many caregivers share similar lifestyle habits

and genes as their [family members](#), the act of caregiving itself is associated with increased [cardiovascular disease risk](#). More than one-half of hospitalized cardiovascular disease patients plan to have an informal caregiver, such as a spouse or other family member, assist them.

Researchers followed 423 caregivers for a year after their family member was hospitalized for [cardiovascular disease](#) at New York-Presbyterian Hospital/Columbia University Medical Center between January 2005 and June 2007. Caregivers self-reported their lifestyle habits for twelve months after their loved one was hospitalized.

Primary caregivers who reported feeling overwhelmed or burdened by time demands, [sleep disturbances](#), financial strain or upsetting behavior by their family member were less likely to report eating a heart-healthy diet or to engage in [moderate exercise](#) in the year following a family member's hospital release. "Caregivers often neglect their health as a result of the demands of caregiving. This neglect is most likely one of the pathways which high rates of morbidity and early mortality become associated with caregiving," said Richard Birkel, Ph.D., senior vice president for health at the National Council on Aging in Washington, D.C.

Birkel said the study confirms what is known about the often unhealthy burden of personal caregiving. "Caregivers need to ask for help, take time for personal activities like exercise and relaxation, maintain a good diet and do two things not mentioned in the study—don't smoke and keep alcohol intake moderate," he said.

Mosca added that the critical point is when a family member is discharged from the hospital. "That time frame is a red flag for caregivers to take preventive action to avoid developing adverse lifestyle behaviors as they cope with the demand of helping their loved one."

More emphasis should be placed on coping mechanisms, depression and stress, she said. "These factors will strongly influence whether or not lifestyle education will be adhered to and if efforts to achieve healthy lifestyles are successful."

More information: Mochari-Greenberger, H. and Mosca, Lori. (2012). Caregiver Burden and Nonachievement of Healthy Lifestyle Behaviors Among Family Caregivers of Cardiovascular Disease Patients, *American Journal of Health Promotion*, In Press.

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