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Staying Healthy: Risks for Family Caregivers for Dementia Patients

About 80% of people with dementia are cared for by family members at home. An estimated 16 million Americans, two-thirds of them women, are volunteering an average of 1,200 hours each year to a family member's dementia care. Four million of them also are caring for children at home. Most of the "sandwich generation" is predicted to do this for longer than four years. They face greater risks for anxiety, depression, and poorer quality of life, than caregivers for people with any other health condition.

<https://www.cdc.gov/aging/caregiving/alzheimer.htm>
(<https://www.cdc.gov/aging/caregiving/alzheimer.htm>)

The psychological burden and stress on caregivers is undeniable. Research reveals caregivers' stress hormones increase, and studies showed caregivers performed poorly on attention and decision-making tasks, and tended to exhibit poorer memory.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27986469/>
(<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/27986469/>)

A 2014 analysis of 37 controlled trials reveals stress on spouse caregivers increases their vulnerability to disease, diminishes their ability to provide optimal care, and increases their risk for early death. Researchers discovered that compared to non-dementia caregiving peers, dementia caregivers (DCGs) had higher risks for coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, cardiometabolic disease, kidney disease, disturbed sleep, systemic inflammation, faster cell aging, and poorer cognitive functioning.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3975665/>
(<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3975665/>)

About 40% of DCGs experience depression and anxiety, with 16% reporting they have contemplated

suicide: **<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26161825/>**

(<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26161825/>). Research also found that more severe dementia symptoms, and greater dementia-related problems, were associated with worse depression and anxiety among caregivers. This was particularly true with adult-child caregivers, rather than spousal DCGs: **<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29878117/>**
(<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29878117/>). Adult-child DCGs experience more guilt, with daughters bearing stronger correlations between burden and mental health symptoms. Living with the patient further increased the burden on adult children.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20374966/>
(<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/20374966/>)

A 2021 study in *Journal of Alzheimer's Disease*, of 159 adult-child DCGs revealed that caregiver self-efficacy (confidence in one's ability to organize and manage caregiving situations) reduced perceived stress and self-rated poor health. Adult-child DCG distress over care was significantly stronger among DCGs not living with the person with dementia. Parental overprotection was directly linked to distress.

<https://content.iospress.com/articles/journal-of-alzheimers-disease/jad210624> (**<https://content.iospress.com/articles/journal-of-alzheimers-disease/jad210624>**)

A 2021 study published in *Psych*, evaluated the value and effectiveness of a Dementia Caregiver Interview Guide intended to provide support for family caregivers of people with dementia. A 12 question Caregiver Risk Screen provided a scale of caregiver functioning and risk of decline. This risk screen gave providers and

counselors earlier opportunities for effective intervention.

<https://www.mdpi.com/2624-8611/3/4/36/htm>

(<https://www.mdpi.com/2624-8611/3/4/36/htm>)

If you, or someone you know, is experiencing distress as a caregiver for a person with dementia, talk with your healthcare provider right away. Mental health resources are available to help ease anxiety, depression, and the burden of caring, and there are strategies to help increase the skillsets of caregivers, so they can feel greater self-efficacy.

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