

The Caregiver's Companion  
to Physical Health:

# Relieving stress **through movement**



# Your health matters too

**A**s a caregiver, you probably aren't thinking about your own health right now. Of course you want to give all you can, so it can be normal to put aside your own health. But caregiving can be stressful. Although stress can be helpful over short periods of time, constant stress is harmful.

Consider a car when the accelerator gets stuck. Constant acceleration causes strain on the tires, and wear and tear on the engine. Driving 100 miles an hour without ever slowing down also increases the chance of crashing. In the same way, a lot of stress can cause you to get sick easier and take longer to get well.



Allison, caregiver

The purpose of *The Caregiver's Companion to Physical Health* is to help you learn and practice simple physical ways to relieve stress. In this chapter:

### Burn off and turn off the stress

- **Stretching:** Learn easy stretches you can do anywhere—it feels good!
- **Counting your steps:** Learn why your movement matters and how you can move more and feel better
- **Getting the rest you need:** Learn helpful tips that can help you fall asleep and stay asleep

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### Making healthy choices when time is short

- **Eating, drinking and more:** Learn tips for eating on the go, why water matters so much, and how some perceived stress-relievers actually make things worse
- **Treating yourself well:** Learn how to listen to what your body needs, and how to be gentle with yourself

# How are you doing **right now**?

Before you read on, take a minute to answer a few questions about how you are doing in these areas:

- Are your muscles relaxed and comfortable? .....  Yes  No
- Do you find time to walk—even a little—each day?.....  Yes  No
- Are you getting at least 7 hours of sleep per night? .....  Yes  No
- Do you drink 8–10 glasses of water daily?.....  Yes  No
- Do you eat healthy snacks on a regular basis?.....  Yes  No
- Do you get at least 10 minutes of fresh air a day? .....  Yes  No
- Do you take time to take care of yourself every day?.....  Yes  No

If you've checked "No" more times than "Yes," you're not alone. But that also means you could add some time into your day to take care of yourself. In studies with caregivers, nearly a third reported having health problems. By taking a little time for yourself each day, you can stay healthier.



# Stretching and walking to burn off stress

One way you can lower the stress is to “burn it off” by increasing how much you move each day. As a caregiver, you may spend a lot of time sitting—whether in the hospital, waiting for appointments, or talking with others.

You might be surprised how good it feels to start moving instead of sitting, and for good reason! Think of this as an opportunity— not an inconvenience!

Not only does moving feel good, but stretching and walking helps:

- Relax your tense and aching muscles
- Fight illness
- Give you more energy
- Improve your concentration
- Boost your mood

Write down a goal of what you would like to do each day, and then keep track of the progress.



“I did carry a lot of stress around in my neck and shoulders. For a long time I had trouble with range of motion in my neck. It took me a while to realize it was stress. I thought I had just pulled a muscle or something.” — **Brian, caregiver**

## Before you begin stretching

Use the stretches and pictures on pages 6–8 to help you get on your way. Before you start, here are a few suggestions to get the most from your stretches:

- Set a goal to stretch at least **once a day**
- **Slow and relaxed**—“bouncing” is bad, and can cause you to pull the muscle you are trying to stretch
- Stretch only until you feel a **mild pull**—overstretching can cause damage—back off the stretch if you feel pain
- **Hold** each stretch for the number of seconds listed
- **Breathe** slowly and naturally—do not hold your breath while stretching
- **Relax** the stretch—again, only to the point of mild tension

# Simple stretches you can do anywhere



## Side of neck

1. Sit or stand with arms hanging loosely at sides
2. Tilt head sideways, first one side then the other
3. Hold for 5 seconds

Repeat 1-3 times

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## Back of neck

1. Sit or stand with arms hanging loosely at sides
2. Gently tilt head forward to stretch back of neck
3. Hold for 3 seconds

Repeat 1-3 times

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## Side of shoulder and back of upper arm

1. Stand or sit and place right hand on right shoulder
2. With left hand, pull right elbow across chest toward left shoulder
3. Hold for 10 to 20 seconds

Repeat on other side

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## Shoulder, middle back, arms, hands, fingers, wrist

1. Interlace fingers and turn palms out
2. Extend arms in front at shoulder height
3. Hold for 10 to 20 seconds

Relax and repeat



## Back of upper arm (triceps), top of shoulders, waist

1. Keep knees slightly flexed
2. Stand or sit with arms overhead
3. Hold elbow with hand of opposite arm
4. Pull elbow behind head gently as you slowly lean to side until mild stretch is felt
5. Hold 10 to 15 seconds

Repeat on other side

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## Middle back

1. Stand with hands on hips
2. Gently twist torso at waist until stretch is felt
3. Hold 10 to 15 seconds

Repeat on other side

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## Ankles

1. Stand and hold onto something for balance
2. Lift right foot and rotate foot and ankle 8 to 10 times clockwise, then 8 to 10 times counterclockwise

Repeat on other side (Note: can also be done sitting)

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## Front of thigh (quadriceps)

1. Stand a little away from wall and place left hand on wall for support.
2. Standing straight, grasp top of left foot with right hand
3. Pull heel toward buttock
4. hold 10 to 20 seconds

Repeat on other side



## Calf

1. Stand a little way from wall and lean on it with forearms, head resting on hands
2. Place right foot in front of you, leg bent, left leg straight behind you
3. Slowly move hips forward until you feel stretch in calf of left leg
4. Keep left heel flat and toes pointed straight ahead
5. Hold easy stretch 10 to 20 seconds

Do not bounce

Repeat on other side

Do not hold breath

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## Inner thigh, groin

1. Stand with feet pointed straight ahead, a little more than shoulder-width apart
2. Bend right knee slightly and move left hip downward toward right knee
3. Hold 10 to 15 seconds

Repeat on other side

If necessary, hold on to something (chair, etc.) for balance

# Easy ways to add more walking into your day

Every step counts, but do you have any idea how many steps you take in a day? You may not be aware of how little you move in a day, until you notice you feel stiff and sore.

Using a pedometer can help you track how many steps you take now, and help set goals to add more. If you don't have a pedometer, keep track of how many minutes you walk, and each day add a few more.



## Making the most of a pedometer

- **Set a goal.** 5,000 steps each day is a good place to start. Between 5,000 to 7,000 steps is considered “low active.” If this is too much for you, then start where you can, and add more each day. Try to get to 10,000 each day.
- **Clip** the pedometer to your waistband.
- **Check** the pedometer often. Check throughout the day to see where you are to your goal. If it's mid-afternoon and you are only halfway to your goal, take a few minutes to walk more!
- **Write** down how many steps you take. Track your progress. Many pedometers will automatically reset at midnight, so it will be ready to go the next morning.



Are you wondering **WHEN** you would have time to walk to reach your goal?

# Here are some **easy ideas** you can try:

## While at the hospital:

### On your own:

- Start a walking group with other caregivers on the unit
- Ask if there is a treadmill or walking track at the hospital that you can use
- Ask if there is someone who could fill in for you while you take a short walk—even 10 or 20 minutes
- Get at least 10 minutes of fresh air outside
- Take the stairs instead of an elevator
- Take a long way around to the cafeteria or other places you need to be

### With your loved one:

- If there is an exercise room for patients, see if you can use a treadmill at the same time
- Take a walk up and down the halls
- If there is a physical therapist or exercise physiologist, ask them about opportunities to walk, workout, or do yoga in the hospital or in the community

## While at home:

### On your own:

- Ask a neighbor or friend to join you, and pick a regular time if possible. You may need to arrange for someone to fill in for you (try adding to your wish list of how others can help you)
- Walk the dog an extra five or 10 minutes
- Instead of meeting a friend for coffee, suggest a walk
- Walk around the house during TV ads

### With your loved one:

- If okay with the doctor, start taking short walks outside together

“I stayed at a hotel room most nights. It had an exercise facility so that I could work off some of the stress and I could get out of the hospital for a while.” — **Jana, caregiver**

# Turning off the stress to get the **rest you need**

“I tried to head to bed early every night to be by myself and read, which was especially helpful because we had other family caregivers living with us for six months. That was my time alone and I felt no guilt about it.”  
— Allison, caregiver

Sleep is one of the most common unmet needs of caregivers, and it can be difficult to get the recommended seven to eight hours of restful sleep each night. Unfortunately, if you aren't sleeping well, you will have far less energy to do what you need to do each day, and have a harder time coping with the stress you are under. With less sleep, it's easy to feel more emotional and have trouble thinking clearly.

In the quiz on page 3, did you check that you were getting at enough sleep each night? If not, you may be wondering what you could do to get more. Surprisingly, what you do in the time before bed can affect how well you sleep.



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## things to try **during the day**, to help you sleep at night

1. Try to wake up and go to bed at about the **same time every day**.
2. Be sure to spend some **time outdoors in the light**, ideally in the mid to late afternoon.
3. **Regular exercise** in the late afternoon can help sleep; however, try not to exercise too close to bedtime.
4. **Don't have caffeine 4-6 hours before bedtime**. That means limiting coffee, tea, soft drinks, and chocolate. Limiting caffeine in general during the day also helps.
5. **Avoid alcohol near bedtime**. Although it may help you fall asleep faster, it may also cause you to wake up during the night, leaving you less rested.
6. **Do not smoke near bedtime** or if you wake up in the middle of the night. If you are on the nicotine patch, put a new one on in the morning, not at night.
7. **Limit heavy meals near bedtime** as they may hurt sleep, but a light snack can be helpful.

# 5

## things to try to help you **fall asleep easier**

1. Use the **bedroom only for sleep**: don't eat or watch TV.
2. Make sure your **room is comfortable**: dark until the sun rises, comfortable temperature, and free from distracting noises. Try using a fan for background "white noise" or soft earplugs.
3. **Use relaxation techniques** to help you relax at bedtime. Use deep breathing or meditation exercises to slow your thoughts.
4. If your loved one is awake or restless at night, **consider in-home help** during the night, or ask a friend or family member to stay over one night a week while you sleep in a separate room. Consider using a baby monitor if you are worried that you won't hear a call for assistance.
5. If you are having a lot of difficulty, ask your doctor about **sleep medications**. Keep in mind, though, that they are designed only for short-term use.

# 3

## things to try when your **thoughts are keeping you awake**

1. **Sometimes reading can be a good distraction** if thinking is keeping you awake. Make sure that the story isn't so exciting that it keeps you from sleeping.
2. **If you don't fall to sleep after 20 or 30 minutes, get out of your bed and do something else.** You may want to sit on the couch and drink a warm glass of milk, do a relaxation exercise, take a warm bath, or do some gentle stretching. Return to bed when you are ready to try sleeping again.
3. **Write down your thoughts on paper.** Whether you write down a stream of worries or a list of things to do tomorrow, get them out of your mind and on the page. Once your mind is empty, take a deep breath and think to yourself, "There is nothing I can do about these at this moment. I have put them down on paper and will come back to them in the morning with a fresh start." Often problems that feel "larger than life" in the dark of night are much more manageable in the light of morning.



# Making **healthy choices**, even when time is short



With all you have to think of and do right now, eating and drinking may be one area that you have on “auto-pilot.” This may not be the time to drastically change your habits, but there are little things you can do that will make a big difference in how you feel each day.

Stress can affect how you eat—sometimes eating too much or too little—or choosing what is quick or comforting, but not nutritious. The choices you make may end up causing you to have less energy or get sick more easily.

But when you don’t have time to cook, or are at a hospital and can’t cook, there are still some little things you can try:

## try this

Plan ahead and make up several snack bags that can be ready when you need a quick boost: Raisins, nuts, cereal, dried fruit, pretzels

Healthy on-the-go snacks like yogurt, string cheese and crackers, bananas, grapes

Bottle of water

Baked potato and side salad at a fast-food restaurant

Pre-washed fresh-cut vegetables like celery, carrot sticks, peapods

Several small meals and snacks a day

Foods high in Vitamin B and C, to fight illness, such as: broccoli, sweet potatoes, whole grains, oranges

## not that

Vending machine choices of candy or chips, or letting yourself get too hungry

Cookies or candy bars, or high-sugar cereals

Cola or sports drink

Cheeseburger and French fries

Skipping vegetables

Skipping meals and then eating large amounts, before bed

Foods lower in nutrition: White bread, white rice, lettuce, mashed potatoes

## Why **drinking water** matters so much, especially right now

Believe it or not, your body's need for water is second only to oxygen. If you don't have enough water each day, you may be feeling even more tired. Dehydration can cause fatigue, which isn't what you need right now! Try to drink 8-10 glasses of water each day. You will need more than this amount if you are drinking soft drinks, coffee or alcohol, which cause you to lose fluids.

Try to keep a large water bottle on hand and fill it with cool, fresh water four times a day. This will help remind you to keep drinking.

## Stress relievers that may be **adding to your stress**

Earlier, you learned that a full night of sleep can help your concentration, improve your ability to handle difficult days, and more. It is not uncommon for people to drink alcohol or smoke to help them relax, especially at the end of a hard day. If your stress relievers include alcohol or smoking, here are some things to think about:

### **Alcohol**

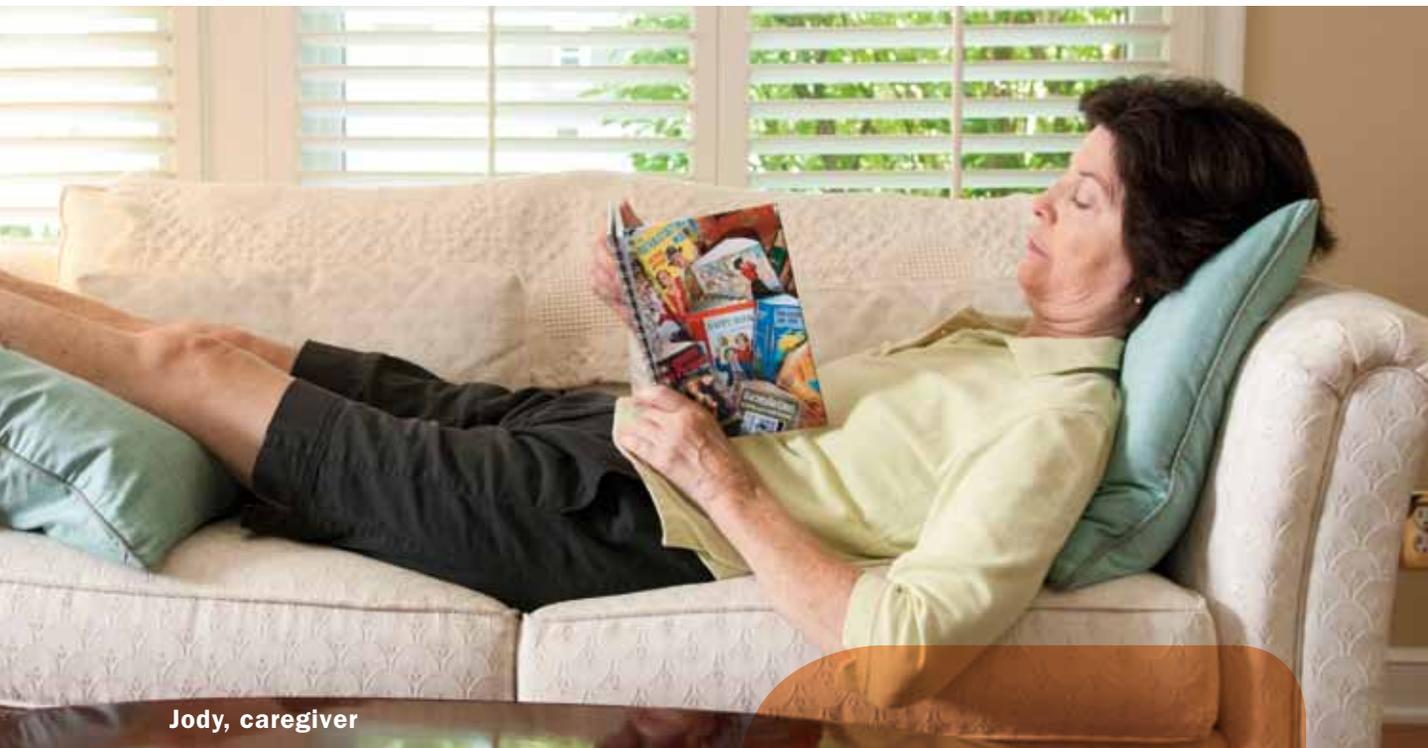
While alcohol may “relax” you, it also interferes with sleep. So you may fall asleep easier, but have trouble staying asleep. Alcohol also dehydrates you, which can lead to feeling even more tired.

### **Smoking**

Although it can be difficult to quit smoking at a time that you are feeling very stressed, tobacco can interfere with your sleep. Also, smoking around your loved one can put them at higher risk for infection. If you can, limit your smoking and only smoke outside. If possible, try nicotine gum or lozenges. It can also help to ask another caregiver or friend who doesn't smoke to go for a walk with you.

If you are ready to quit smoking, take advantage of smoking cessation support programs available to you.

# Treating yourself **well**



Jody, caregiver

## Be gentle with yourself

You're probably trying to do everything. But be gentle with yourself as you would be to a friend. Don't push yourself too hard. Remember the "stuck car accelerator" discussed in the beginning of this chapter. LISTEN to when your body says it's time to let your foot off of the gas. LISTEN when your body says it's tired and needs a rest. It's all right to ask yourself what is more important in the long run, that extra pile of laundry that needs folding, or your body's need for rest? The laundry will always be there, but your health might not.

With everything going on around you, it's very common to ignore what your body is telling you.

Take some time to write down how YOU are feeling—what do you need today?



## Take time to keep yourself healthy

Adding in the exercises, good food, and good rest will all help you stay healthy. Of course, washing your hands often will also help prevent colds or infection. But be sure to LISTEN if your body isn't feeling well, and get the care you need before you are feeling worse. Remember to keep your own medical appointments as much as possible, and don't forget to refill your own prescriptions.

## Take time for a massage

A study of caregivers showed that massage significantly decreased their depression, anxiety, and fatigue. Massages can be expensive, but sometimes massage therapists will donate their time to patients and families at medical centers. You can also look for a massage school in your area. Often, massages are offered at a reduced price, and you'll be helping a student as well as yourself!

## Take time to laugh and play

When was the last time you had a good belly laugh? If it was longer than 48 hours ago, you may be in a state of "laughter deprivation." Studies have shown that laughter can relax you and even strengthen your immune system. Try to have a good laugh at least once a day. You might take five minutes to look at a funny video on YouTube or find a good book of jokes. Play is also fundamental to your health. Having fun with others, with children or with pets, or with your loved one is important.

## Treat yourself as you would treat a friend

If you find that you are being hard on yourself or talking to yourself in a negative way, think about how you might talk to a friend. You probably would be much more kind and understanding to your friend. Try to talk to yourself the same way you would talk to a dear friend. Would you tell her that she is doing a good job? Would you suggest that he take a break or rest? Try to tell yourself those same things.

## Chapter Recap:

- *Try to take time each day to stretch*
- *Whether you're walking alone, with friends or your loved one: use your pedometer to count your steps*
- *Try new ideas to help you get better sleep*
- *Pack a bag of healthy snacks like nuts and veggies to avoid unhealthy eating on go*

Visit [BeTheMatch.org/companion](https://www.BetheMatch.org/companion) for a list of resources and tips to help you improve your physical health

