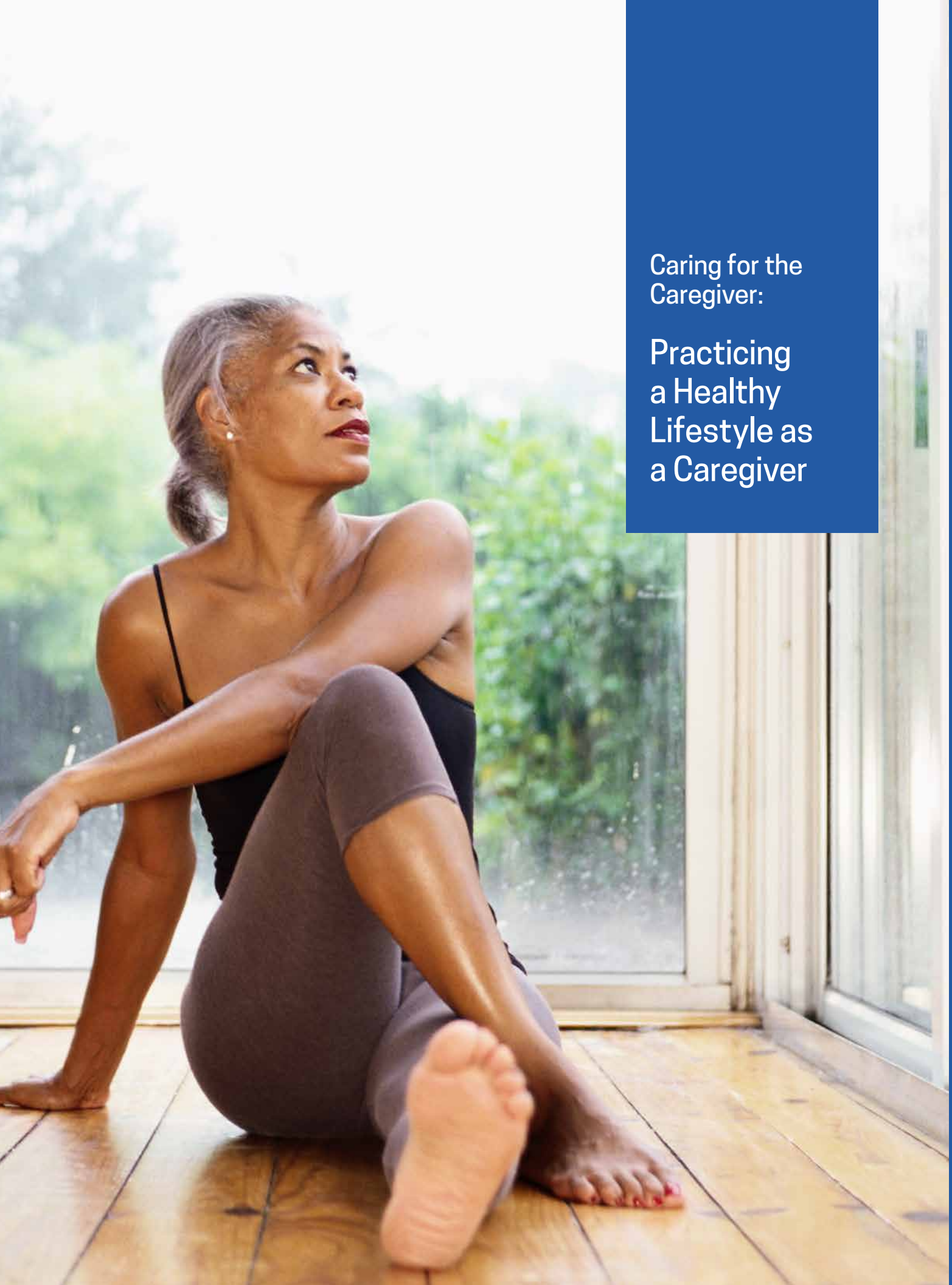


Caring for the Caregiver:

Practicing a Healthy Lifestyle as a Caregiver

This guide will help you to:

- Identify areas where your lifestyle habits are impacting your health and wellness.
- Understand the importance of sleep, exercise and physical activity, and diet for your health.
- Develop powerful strategies to help you achieve and maintain a healthy lifestyle along the caregiving journey.

Practicing a Healthy Lifestyle as a Caregiver is Possible.

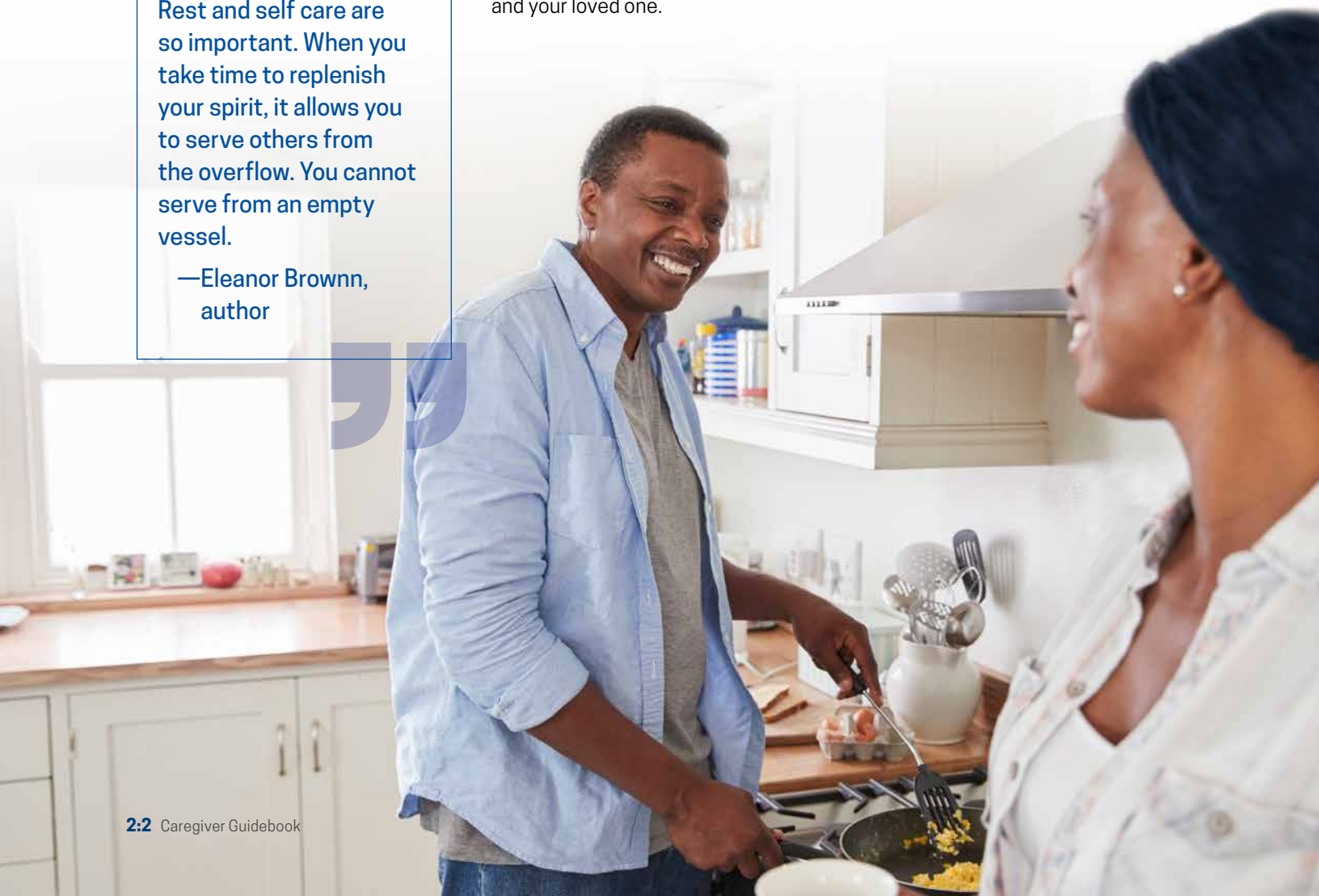
Getting enough quality sleep, exercising regularly, and eating healthy—these are key ingredients for good physical and mental health.

These are also areas that caregivers often struggle to maintain, placing them at greater risk for certain health complications. Researchers have found that caregivers may have more chronic health conditions such as heart and blood pressure problems, diabetes, and arthritis. They also are more likely to have a weakened immune system, making it harder to fight off infections and heal wounds.

The stresses and demands of caregiving can take a toll on your health, and in turn, your ability to care for your loved one. However, there are steps you can take to prevent this from happening.

This chapter delves deeper into how to maintain a healthy lifestyle, addressing **sleep, exercise and physical activity, and diet and nutrition**. Here, you can explore easy ways to add healthy self-care practices into your everyday life as a caregiver, so that you can protect your health and stay strong for yourself and your loved one.

> Rest and self care are so important. When you take time to replenish your spirit, it allows you to serve others from the overflow. You cannot serve from an empty vessel.
>
> —Eleanor Brownn, author



How do Caregivers Describe Changes to Their Lifestyle Habits?

Below are common changes that caregivers experience related to their sleep, physical activity, diet, energy level, and overall health. It's important to take these signs seriously before they become a bigger problem.

What about you?

Circle words that speak to you the most and write in anything else that describes how you're feeling.

Exhausted and **always tired**

Poor sleep

Poor eating habits
(eating too much or too little; gaining or losing weight)

Exercising less

Having more infections and not staying in bed when **sick**

Important and **valued**

Feeling **depressed**, or **worried**

Aches, pains and **headaches**

Using **more tobacco** and/or **alcohol**

Feeling **strong** and **healthy**

Trying to **care for myself** while **caring for her**



> You have to take care of yourself because if you yourself go down, what good are you to give to anyone else?

What are the Lifestyle Challenges that Caregivers Face?

Sleep Problems and Fatigue

Enough can't be said about the importance of sleep to health. It's been called the "golden chain that ties health and our bodies together."

Sleep problems and fatigue are very common among family caregivers. They may not get enough sleep or enough quality sleep. Because sleep affects brain function and emotional well-being, sleep loss can take a toll on your mental and physical health. It can impair memory function and cause trouble with making decisions, solving problems, controlling your emotions and behavior, and coping with change. Sleep loss can also lower your body's ability to fight infections, and it can lead to heart issues, diabetes, depression, and even suicide.

For caregivers, not getting proper rest can contribute to caregiver fatigue, which is described as physical and emotional exhaustion or tiredness. Caregivers are at risk for caregiver fatigue, which is sometimes also called "caregiver burnout." Many times, caregivers don't realize they are suffering from burnout.

Lack of Exercise and Physical Activity

Physical activity helps your physical and emotional/ mental health, promotes better sleep, reduces tension and depression, and increases energy and alertness. Together with a healthy diet, regular physical activity and exercise can help to prevent cardiovascular disease and other chronic health conditions.

However, caregivers often say that they lack the time and energy to stay physically active or exercise. In fact, even though caregiving can be physically demanding, caregivers often find that they are actually less physically active than they were before their loved one's diagnosis. Feelings of anxiety, fatigue, and depression can take precedence over exercise.

Changes in Diet and Eating Habits

As the old adage goes, you are what you eat. Eating a well-balanced, heart-healthy diet can improve brain function and energy level, lower your risk for certain diseases, and help fight infection. A healthy diet may even reduce symptoms of depression. [source]

Many Americans today have trouble maintaining a healthy diet, instead consuming foods with too much added sugar, saturated fats, and sodium. Combined with a lack of exercise, research shows that this kind of diet is linked to chronic conditions, including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and some cancers. [source]

Maintaining a healthy diet can be even more of a struggle for caregivers. Caregivers may feel they don't have the time and energy to prepare healthy meals. Caregivers with financial concerns are even less likely to eat a healthy diet.



Definition:

Caregiver Fatigue

Physical and emotional exhaustion or tiredness. Also described as "caregiver burnout."

Know the signs of Caregiver Burnout:

- Withdrawal from friends, family and other loved ones
- Loss of interest in activities previously enjoyed
- Feeling blue, irritable, hopeless and helpless
- Changes in appetite, weight or both
- Changes in sleep patterns
- Getting sick more often
- Feelings of wanting to hurt yourself or the person for whom you are caring
- Emotional and physical exhaustion
- Irritability

Source: Cleveland Clinic, 2020 my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/9225-caregiver-burnout

YOUR THOUGHTS

In what ways have your lifestyle habits changed as a caregiver?

How do these problems affect you and your family on a daily basis?

What are some of the **biggest barriers** to managing these problems?

1)

2)

3)

4)

5)

Now, let's explore some strategies and ways to help you overcome these barriers.

Strategies for Practicing a Healthy Lifestyle

You may feel too busy to think of your own health, but practicing healthy lifestyle habits will improve both your physical and emotional health, giving you the strength and stamina to be an effective caregiver. Here you can explore different types of strategies to develop and maintain a healthy lifestyle. Pick those that you think may work for you and help you overcome your biggest barriers.

Sleep, Rest, and Relaxation

Getting enough sleep every night is important, but so is getting enough quality sleep. Here are some ways you can achieve a better night's sleep and combat or prevent caregiver fatigue.

Create a comfortable sleeping environment. A comfortable sleeping environment is a good first step to promote rest, relaxation, and sleep. There are some simple things you can do to make your bedroom more comfortable:

- Make sure the bedroom is quiet, comfortable, cool, dark, and secure.
- Turn off phones, computers and any other electronic devices.
- Keep pets in another area.
- Make sure that your mattress is comfortable.
- Keep sheets clean and smooth.
- Have enough blankets and bed clothes to stay warm.

Practice good sleep hygiene. A good sleep routine is often referred to as good "sleep hygiene." Poor sleep patterns can become a habit. Developing a sleep/wake routine will help train your body and mind to know when to sleep and when to be awake.

Your sleep routine should involve a **pre-bedtime routine** to help you wind down and prepare for sleep. Try to go to bed at the same time every night. End stimulating activity within two hours of going to sleep and turn off all screens one hour before going to bed. Blue light emitted from smart devices, television and computer screens can interfere with your body's natural sleep patterns. Some additional pre-bedtime techniques include:

- Take a warm bath.
- Drink warm milk or herbal tea.
- Read a light or even dull book.
- Listen to soft music.



Helpful Tip:

Practice good sleep hygiene throughout the day.

6-8 hours before sleep: Avoid caffeine, including coffee, caffeinated soda, and chocolate.

4 hours before sleep: Avoid drinking alcohol.

2 hours before sleep: End stimulating activities, like exercise and work.

1 hour before sleep: Turn off all screens.

Evening: Avoid large evening meals, but eat a light snack at bedtime if you are hungry.

Morning: Set an alarm and get up at the same time every day, no matter what.



Learn More

Go to **Helping Your Loved One Manage Fatigue, Sleep and Energy Levels** (on page xx) for more strategies to help her develop good sleep habits.

If you find yourself unable to sleep, use this **sleep hygiene rule of thumb:** don't stay in bed for longer than 20 minutes. Move to another dark room and stay there until sleepy, then return to your bed. Avoid using your bed for activities like watching TV, reading, or working on a laptop.

You should also try to establish a good **morning routine**:

- Set an alarm and get up at the same time every day, even if you have not had a good night's sleep. Get up at the same time even on days that you are not working. This helps your body to develop a pattern of sleep and awake time.
- Help set your sleep/wake cycle by exposing yourself to daylight every day. Light exposure when you first wake up will help set your sleep cycle.

How to care for a "night owl." If the person you care for is up often during the night, here are some tips so you can sleep better and feel more rested:

- **Sleep when they sleep.** Change your sleep cycle to coordinate with your loved one's sleep pattern. If she sleeps a lot during the day but is up at night, take daytime naps.
- **Accept outside help.** If you are afraid to sleep because of concerns for your loved one, ask family and friends to help by staying overnight once in a while, so you can get worry-free rest.
- **Adjust the bathroom.** If your loved one needs your help every time she goes to the bathroom during the night, try adding: grab bars, a raised toilet seat, a bell, and night-lights. You might even consider a bedside commode.

Get daily physical activity. Researchers have found that physical activity like walking or tai chi can promote restful sleep. Be mindful that exercise within two hours of bedtime can keep you awake.

Manage emotional distress. If you feel like stress, anxiety or depression is interfering with your sleep, talk with your health care provider so that they can help you get the right treatment. Research has shown that counseling (psychotherapy or cognitive behavioral therapy), medications, and participation in support groups are all effective in treating anxiety and depression.

Try relaxation techniques. Relaxation techniques may help you reduce fatigue and sleep better. Meditation seems to be the most effective approach and you can add it to your nighttime routine. Progressive muscle relaxation, yoga, guided imagery, and music therapy also have shown to have some benefit.



Talk with your HCP about medications to help with sleep.

It's always important to talk with your doctor before using any new medicine, including over-the-counter medicines, herbs, and supplements. Just like other medicines, these products can have side effects or may change the effects of your other medicines.

Whenever I feel my chest tighten, feel anxious or frustrated, I will take a couple of deep breaths and repeat a calming phrase—right now I am starting with 'Accept, don't expect.'



Medications. If you have problems sleeping, medications may be an option. Your doctor may recommend or prescribe medicine for short-term use to help you re-establish a restful sleep pattern. Talk to your health care provider if you are:

- Taking 30 minutes or more to fall asleep.
- Waking up frequently during the night.
- Staying awake for 30 minutes or more if you wake during the night.

It may be helpful to keep a **sleep diary**. Write down your sleeping habits and fatigue issues throughout the week. This will help you and your healthcare provider determine the cause of your sleep problems and find good solutions.

Exercise and Physical Activity

Being physically active is one of the best things you can do for yourself, especially as a caregiver. Here are some ways you can easily incorporate exercise and physical activity into your weekly routine.

Start out slowly and go easy. Forget "no pain, no gain." Exercise safely to avoid injury and gradually build strength and endurance. Try these tips:

- **Do at least 10 minutes at a time**—you will still benefit. You don't need to exercise all at one time during the day. Try to work up to exercising for 30 minutes, 3 times a week or more.
- **Stick with mild to moderate levels of activity, such as walking,** especially if you're not used to being active or are afraid of getting hurt. Talk with your HCP before starting to exercise if you have a chronic health problem or have been inactive for a while.
- **Include your loved one.** Physical activity can benefit your loved one, too. Ask your oncology team about the best ways to involve your loved one in your activity.

7 Benefits of Exercise and Staying Active

1. Reduces the risk for heart disease, diabetes and other health problems.
2. Helps you manage diabetes and blood sugar levels.
3. Strengthens your bones and muscles, improves balance, and prevents falls.
4. Improves your mental health and mood.
5. Improves the ability to do daily activities.
6. Helps you control your weight.
7. Serves as a time to look after your own needs and take a break from caregiving.

Be active at home. You don't need to hit the gym to stay active. If finding time to exercise is a problem, try adding it into your typical daily activities, such as during chores and errands, or watching TV with your family:

- Work around the house or in the garden/yard.
- Stand up while talking on the phone.
- Stretch to reach items in high places and squat or bend for items at floor level.
- Lift small weights while watching TV.

Take a walk. Walking is a great way to stay active throughout the day. Here are some easy ways to get the extra steps in:

- Take a walk during appointments or while waiting for your loved one to finish tests and/or treatments.
- Go out for a short walk (even just 5-10 minutes) before breakfast, after dinner, or both!
- Park farther away at the shopping mall and walk the extra distance. Wear your walking shoes and sneak in an extra lap or two around the mall.
- Walk or bike to the corner store instead of driving.
- Pick up the pace from leisurely to brisk when walking. Choose a hilly route.

> At the gym, the exercise seems to take all the fuzziness away from your brain.

Join a fitness center, class, or exercise program. You can often find affordable exercise and stress management courses at local community fitness centers, on YouTube videos, or TV programs. The advantage of a fitness center or class is that it also gives you a needed break and a chance to socialize with others.

Try these different types of exercise. Not only will they help with feeling stronger and more physically able to carry out caregiving tasks, but they can reduce feelings of stress and improve your sense of well-being.

- Endurance or aerobic exercises that increase your heart rate and breathing to promote a healthy heart and lungs and help you feel more energetic. *Try: walking, biking, and taking the stairs.*
- Strength exercises make muscles stronger and can help you feel more capable of tackling caregiving tasks. Even small increases with strength can help you carry out every day activities. *Try: using small weights or resistance bands at home.*
- Balance and flexibility exercises help prevent falls, and promote easier movements with everyday activities. *Try: Yoga or tai chi.*

Want more info? Visit your HCP to get additional information or useful strategies for physical activity or exercise.

Diet, Nutrition, and Healthy Eating

Eating a healthy diet is important for everyone. It is especially important when you are taking care of others. A healthy diet can help you feel stronger, improve your overall health and quality of life, and reduce your health risks. However, it can be difficult to know what to eat and how much.

In general, a nutritious diet is one that is rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and low in saturated fat and added sugar. Eat a balanced diet with an emphasis on foods that come from plants and that combines foods from different sources.

Dietary Guidelines 2015 - 2020 from www.health.gov provide an updated set of guidelines for healthy eating. Follow these quick guidelines and tips to make sure you get the nutrition you need, every day.

Fruits and Vegetables. Include 5 or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day from a variety of sources (2 ½ "cup equivalents"). These include dark green vegetables, red and orange vegetables, legumes (beans and peas), starchy vegetables and others.

Examples of a "cup-equivalent": 1 cup raw or cooked vegetable or fruit, 1 cup vegetable or fruit juice, 2 cups leafy salad greens, ½ cup dried fruit.

Grains and Carbohydrates. Include a variety of carbohydrates in about 5-6 servings per day depending on your calorie needs.

Examples of a serving: ½ cup cooked rice, pasta, or cereal; 1 medium slice of bread; 1 ounce of ready-to-eat cereal (about 1 cup of flaked cereal).

- **Choose whole grains over processed or refined grains.** Whole grains are rich in essential nutrients such as vitamins and fiber, are more filling, and promote healthy weight. Examples of whole grain foods: whole wheat, oats, and brown rice.
- **Eat nutrition-dense carbohydrates**—vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and legumes.
- **Avoid highly-processed foods,** such as refined white flour, sugar, and corn syrup. Choose foods in which almost all ingredients are in their natural state.
- **Avoid added sugar.** Sugar contains no essential nutrients and adds "empty" calories to your diet. Eat less than 10% of your daily calories from added sugar such as white sugar, brown sugar, or honey.



Learn More

Go to "**Maintaining a Healthy Lifestyle as a Caregiver**" (on page xx) for in-depth strategies on exercise and physical activity, nutrition and meal preparation, sleep, and self-care as a caregiver.



> It's okay to take a certain amount of time and do something and breathe ... get fresh air and just step away from it for a second.

Fiber. Include 20-30 grams or about 4-6 teaspoons of fiber per day. Examples of fiber rich foods are prunes, oatmeal, popcorn, bran, nuts, and seeds.

Protein. Include a variety of protein foods. Most people need about 4-6 ounces per day (although your loved one may need more during cancer treatment). Protein provides essential amino acids, the building blocks of the cell. It's important for healing and recovery as well as long-term health.

- Good sources of proteins include poultry, beans (legumes), nuts, seeds, low-fat dairy, lean meats and eggs. Cook by baking or broiling.
- Limit proteins high in saturated fats, such as red meat and processed meat (lunch meats, cured and breakfast meats that are made with nitrates).

Fats. Choose fats rich in Omega-3 fatty acids. Salmon, flax seeds and walnuts are excellent food sources of omega 3 fatty acids.

- Cook with liquid vegetable oils, such as canola or olive oil.
- Consume less than 10% of daily calories from saturated fats. Foods higher in saturated fats usually come from animals. These include beef, beef fat, veal, lamb, pork, and lard.
- Avoid trans fats and foods that have "partially hydrogenated oils."



Salt (sodium). Limit the amount of salt you add to foods. Aim for less than 2,300 milligrams of sodium (about 1 teaspoon of salt) per day. Check food labels for sodium. Processed and prepared foods are generally high in sodium.

Fluids. Drink plenty of water and other fluids. A general rule of thumb is to drink 6-8 cups of fluid (a total of 48-64 ounces) per day. Illness, medicines, treatment, activity and things such as weather can affect how much fluid you need to drink.

- Water is the best source of fluid. Other good sources include low-fat milk, low sodium broth, and herbal teas.
- Carry a reusable water bottle with you so you always have water on-hand.
- Limit alcohol intake to one drink per day for women, two for men.

Vitamins and Supplements. Whole foods are better choices than supplements when possible. Many different nutrients found in food work together at the same time—an important reason to eat a variety of foods. However, vitamins and supplements can be helpful if you are having difficulty eating a healthy diet. Here are some tips if you're considering taking them:

- If approved by your doctor, take a daily vitamin and mineral supplement (100% of daily recommended amounts).
- Remember to talk with your doctor before taking supplements and/or vitamins.
- Talk to your HCP or visit the oncology clinic to find out about a referral to talk with a dietician or nutritionist, especially if you have your own chronic health problems.

Get food assistance if needed. If cooking is becoming a burden, consider home-delivered meals. Ask to talk with the Oncology Patient Navigator at the oncology clinic to see if you qualify for any food or meal assistance programs. The person you are caring for may qualify and you may too.

Here are some other ways you can reduce the burden of cooking, but still maintain a healthy diet:

- If family and friends offer to bring over meals, ask that the meals be healthy and nutritious.
- Consider using grocery delivery apps and services to save time shopping.
- Prep meals ahead of time. Try finding healthy recipes that can be stored in the fridge, frozen, or easily made in a slow cooker or oven. This will help you cut down daily cooking time. The recipes on the next page offer a few examples.



Overnight Oats with Peanut Butter and Fruit

Ingredients

- 1 cup of rolled oats
- 1 cup of low-fat milk or unsweetened non-dairy milk (almond, soy, coconut)
- 4 tbsp of peanut butter (can use almond or another nut butter)
- 1.5 tbsp of chia seeds
- Sliced bananas, berries, or fruit of choice (optional)
- Maple syrup (optional)

This is a simple breakfast or snack item that is high in protein and fiber. You can prep it at night, store it in the fridge, and the next day it's ready to go. Make a little extra and enjoy for up to 3 days.

Prep time: 5-10 minutes
Servings: 2

1. Use a large mason jar or a container with a lid. Add in the milk, peanut butter, and chia seeds. Loosely mix together.
2. Add in the oats. Use a spoon to press the oats into the mixture. Make sure all oats have been submerged.
3. Cover with a lid and place in the fridge overnight (6+ hours) so the oats can soak and absorb the liquid mixture.
4. Your oats are ready to eat the next day. Top with your fruit of choice. You can in a teaspoon of maple syrup to sweeten or add low-fat yogurt.
5. Best when eaten cold, but you can also heat up the mixture in a saucepan to enjoy warm. Store for up to 3 days

**If you don't have chia seeds on hand or prefer not to use them, try using less milk in your mixture.*



Slow-Cooker Chili with Vegetables

Ingredients

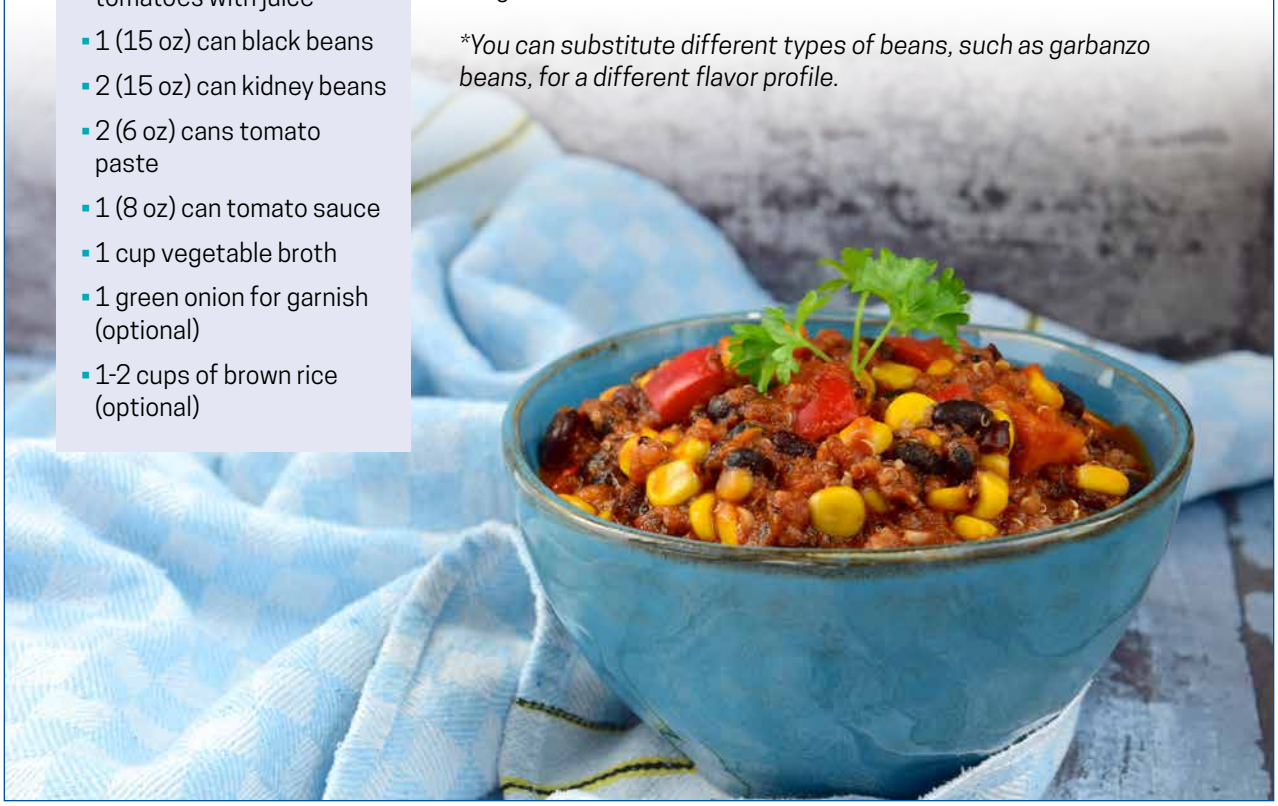
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 3 green, red, and/or yellow bell peppers
- 2 onions
- 4 cloves minced garlic
- 1 (10 oz) package frozen chopped spinach
- 1 cup frozen corn kernels
- 2 zucchini and/or yellow squash
- 6 tbsp chili powder
- 1 tbsp ground cumin
- 1 tbsp dried oregano
- 1 tbsp dried parsley
- ½ tsp salt
- ½ tsp ground black pepper
- 2 (14.5 oz) cans diced tomatoes with juice
- 1 (15 oz) can black beans
- 2 (15 oz) can kidney beans
- 2 (6 oz) cans tomato paste
- 1 (8 oz) can tomato sauce
- 1 cup vegetable broth
- 1 green onion for garnish (optional)
- 1-2 cups of brown rice (optional)

A great option for either lunch or dinner, this hearty chili recipe is packed with lots of nutrient-rich vegetables. You can prep it at the start of the day and let your slow-cooker do the cooking for you. It can last throughout your week or can be stored in the freezer to eat later. Pair with brown rice for a complete source of protein!

Prep time: 40 minutes
Servings: 15

1. Prep the veggies: Chop the peppers, onions, and zucchini / squash. Defrost the corn and defrost/drain the spinach.
2. Sautee the peppers, onion and garlic in olive oil for 8-10 minutes on low to medium heat. Add mixture to slow cooker.
3. Rinse and drain black and kidney beans. Add to slow cooker.
4. Stir in spinach, corn, zucchini/squash, canned diced tomatoes, tomato paste, chili powder, cumin, oregano, parsley, salt, and black pepper.
5. Add tomato sauce and broth into mixture.
6. Cook in a slow cooker on low for 4-5 hours. Add in more broth and tomato sauce for a less thick chili and cook an additional 1-2 hours.
7. Serve with brown rice for a hearty meal and garnish with chopped green onion for extra flavor.

**You can substitute different types of beans, such as garbanzo beans, for a different flavor profile.*



QUICK REFERENCE

Below is a recap of the general strategies that can help you develop and maintain a healthy lifestyle. Check those that resonate the most with you. You can use this page as a quick reference.

- [ ] Create a comfortable sleep environment and practice good sleep hygiene (Page. x)
- [ ] Adjust your sleep schedule to better care for your loved one if they are a “night owl”
- [ ] Improve your sleep through getting more exercise, trying relaxation techniques, and/or talking with your HCP to manage your emotional stress.
- [ ] Talk with your HCP about medications to help with sleep.
- [ ] Start exercising slowly and gradually increase in length.
- [ ] Try being more active at home and while doing your daily activities; make it a point to walk more frequently.
- [ ] Join a fitness center or try out different fitness programs. Incorporate different types of exercise into your regimen.
- [ ] Pay attention to your diet. Follow guidelines for a diet that is rich in vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and healthy sources of proteins.
- [ ] Drink more water to stay better hydrated and reduce salt intake.
- [ ] Add in vitamins and supplements if needed—talk to your doctor first.
- [ ] Look into food assistance programs if cooking and grocery shopping becomes too difficult.
- [ ] Plan ahead by prepping meals that reduce cooking time. Use kitchen appliances like a slow cooker to make meals.

YOUR GOALS & STRATEGIES

What strategies make the most sense to you? How can you and your family use those strategies in your own life?

Create a Plan:
Think about specific goals you want to accomplish. Just tackle one or two goals at a time.

My goal is to _____(what do you hope will happen) **by** _____(timeframe) **so that** _____(why it's important).

What specific strategies will you use to reach your goal? Think about the very next steps you can take to get started.