

Caregivers' health in 'downward spiral'

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More than 2.5 million family caregivers isolated in homes across America suffer from depression, stress and rapidly declining health, often putting the needs of loved ones before their own.

And they often have nowhere to turn for help.

That's according to a study to be released today that takes an in-depth look into the lives of caregivers who say their health is declining. The study by the non-profit National Alliance for Caregiving says caregivers often face a "downward spiral of health that worsens as a result of giving care."

The study included an online survey of 528 caregivers from July 21 to July 28 and in-depth phone interviews and discussion groups.

Caregivers "are out there without anybody helping them," says Gail Gibson Hunt, president of the National Alliance, which is hosting a conference Tuesday in Washington, D.C. It's titled *Caregiver Health as a Public Health Issue*.

"They could get to the point where they can't be a caregiver anymore," she adds.

CAREGIVING TAKES ITS TOLL

Caregivers say their lives have become more difficult in a number of ways:

- 90% More stress or worry
- 69% Less time spent with family and friends
- 51% Now taking more medications
- 37% Less time spent at work
- 10% More frequent use of alcohol or prescription drugs

Source: *National Alliance for Caregiving*

Without family caregivers, sick people often end up being cared for by the public health care system, Hunt says.

With 79 million baby boomers and a shortage of both family and professional caregivers looming, "this is a crisis," Hunt says. "We have to start thinking about this now. We're hoping it will start a dialogue in Washington."

Nearly all caregivers (91%) who participated in the survey, which was paid for by health care company Evercare and conducted by Mathew Greenwald & Associates, said they were depressed.

The survey, which was done to figure out why caregivers as a whole report poorer health than the general population, was based on people reporting their own health. "Not surprisingly," the survey says, "the degree of deterioration in caregivers' health increases in relation to the amount of time they spend caregiving and the intensity of their caregiving."

Caregivers often miss their own routine doctor's appointments, eat poorly and can't sleep because they're busy caring for a loved one. Seventy-two percent said they had not gone to the doctor as often as they should have since they began providing care.

Barbara Redmond, 68, of Phoenix was one of those caregivers. She dropped from 110 to 94 pounds while caring for her husband before he died 2½ years ago. "Sometimes you didn't have time to take a shower. You didn't eat properly because you're so busy preparing their food and tending to them. You miss doctor's appointments because you can't get somebody to stay with him or you can't (bring) him.

"You know you have to be strong for yourself, but you don't have the time and the chance."

Though the survey looked only at the caregivers in declining health, the health of the nation's 44.4 million caregivers in general "is a public health issue," says John Crews, senior health scientist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But it often remains a "hidden" problem because "it's not played out on the street corner. It's played out in homes."

"People need help," Crews says. "They need respite. They need a break. They need somebody who has knowledge."

There are some resources out there, including from some health care companies and private organizations. But, Crews adds, "we don't have a system in place to support caregivers or any kind of a national initiative. We haven't even conceptualized it."

Caregivers surveyed said they would use resources such as a toll-free number through which they could contact experts and mobile health clinics.

John Mach, CEO of Evercare, says his company sponsored the study because helping caregivers also helps the person for whom they're caring. And, he says, "lifetime odds of someone in your family needing long-term care or being in a situation where they need home care is pretty high. That's why you should care. It could happen to you."

Adds Gary Barg, editor in chief of *Today's Caregiver* magazine, based in Hollywood, Fla.: "We've been saying this for years. Maybe now that there is an official study, official action will take place."