

Caregiver's HOME COMPANION

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H E L P I N G T H O S E W H O H E L P O T H E R S

Double Dose of Caregiving

Coping While Caring for More Than One Loved One at a Time

By Melissa A. Goodwin



Like a roll of the dice, caregiving can take many unpredictable turns, bringing good fortune or bad to the lap of the caregiver. But how would you view the prospect of caring for two, or even more, aging family members at the same time? Could you handle it? Would you handle it?

This scenario is not far fetched, and an increasing number of caregivers are faced with these questions, as the odds of juggling multiple caregiving assignments, or a succession of them, become more likely. ►

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Editor and Publisher
Chris Pederson

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Custom Publishing & Operations
Director
Robert G. Whitton

Art Director
Laura D. Campbell

Webmaster
NOW Interactive Solutions
webmaster@caregivershome.com

Mail
Caregiver's Home Companion
P.O. Box 693
Southport, CT 06890-0693

Phones
Subscriptions & Customer Service:
(877) 259-1977
Advertising & Sales: (203) 254-3538

Administration & Editorial:
(203) 254-3538

Custom Publishing: (203) 438-0810

e-mail Inquiries:
editor@caregivershome.com

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"Plans are nothing; planning is everything."

—Dwight D. Eisenhower

Coping While Caring for More Than One Loved One at a Time *Continued from page 1*

Your chances of being faced with a double dose of caregiving often lie in the math: With three out of five people over the age of 50 having parents who are still alive, the odds of eventually becoming someone's caregiver are pretty high. Toss in longer life expectancy, and it becomes even more likely that many of us will find ourselves caring for not just one person, but two or even more people at the same time.

Many scenarios will emerge—we could be caring for our parents, in-laws, a spouse and a parent, or a combination of immediate and extended family members who need our help.

The implications are mind-boggling. Imagine being responsible not only for the details of your own life, but for those of two or more loved ones, as well. That's two or more additional stacks of bills, bank statements, insurance questions, medical issues, doctor appointments, medications, home care and legal issues for you to manage.

There's no crystal ball to show you what lies ahead, but you can be proactive about preparing for this possibility. Here are some ideas to help you gear up ahead of time and to manage on an ongoing basis if you find yourself caring for several loved ones at the same time:

Have "The Talk"

It may be difficult, but having "The Talk" with loved ones is perhaps the single-most important thing you can do to proactively prepare for the challenges of multiple caregiving. The Talk consists of having a heart-to-heart with each of your loved ones about finances, insurance, medical and legal issues, as well as their wishes regarding medical treatment and end-of-life care. The Talk is also your opportunity to tell your loved ones what you need in order to help them manage their affairs and honor their wishes.

Karen Cook of Paradise Valley, Arizona, can attest to how The Talk helped when she found herself caring for both her mother and her aunt, each of whom live nearby in separate homes. Both are in their 80's and have Alzheimer's, and the aunt has also suffered a stroke.

Karen told me, "Because we had 'The Talk', I was able to reassure both Mom and Aunt Katherine that I would make sure that their wishes were honored. They both gave me legal

power of attorney, making it possible for me to take care of the business of their lives, especially once their Alzheimer's advanced."

Get Organized

Caring for multiple loved ones means digging in and fully understanding each person's financial situation, monthly bills, bank accounts, medical records, insurance, and legal documents. Help yourself by creating separate files for each person's information and keep them separate and organized at all times.

Calendar Management

When caring for more than one person, managing your time and energy become more essential. One key to effective time management is maintaining a well-organized calendar that encompasses your schedule and theirs.

Karen Cook strongly recommends keeping that calendar with you at all times. She told me, "I have my calendar with me every time I take Mom or Aunt Katherine to an appointment, because invariably we leave with follow-up appointments. If you have to go home to check your calendar and then try to call back later to set something up, you will waste a tremendous amount of valuable time."

Factor in Extra Time

Even with good calendar management, unexpected situations will arise and things will take longer than anticipated. You can't predict everything that can go wrong, but you can mentally prepare yourself to "expect the unexpected."

For example, the bank required Karen's aunt to present photo identification when they tried to add Karen's name to bank accounts. Her aunt no longer had a driver's license, so they had to take extra time to get her a picture ID. Because of this, what they had thought would be a short trip to the bank turned into all day outing.

To keep your schedule on track and your stress level in check, add on 20% to your time estimate for every appointment on the calendar and for every interaction with doctors, lawyers, banks, accountants, and insurance companies.

Take Care of Legal Issues

We've all heard horror stories about situations that arise because a loved one's legal wishes

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Where's Mom's Medical Degree?

Self-Medicating by Seniors too Common, Always Dangerous

By Kelly D. Morris

"Alka-Seltzer!" my grandma used to say. "Good for whatever ails ye!"

Well, maybe. But maybe not, if you're taking it along with some cold pills, some over-the-counter cough syrup, and a handful of prescription drugs. It says right on the box that you shouldn't take it without talking to your doctor if you are on blood-thinning drugs or on medication for diabetes, gout, or arthritis. My grandma had bad eyes. I don't think she read the fine print.

And many older people don't either. They assume that over-the-counter medications are safe because, well, they are available over the counter. So they self-medicate without reading all of the instructions on the package. And sometimes sufficient information isn't even available on the package. For instance, on my store-brand bottle of cough syrup, it says that it may cause interactions with prescription medications—but it doesn't say which ones. To be safe, I'll have to ask the pharmacist. However, many people simply don't ask.

In fact, a study conducted at the University of Connecticut found that 65% of older adults sampled had taken an over-the-counter medication that could cause an adverse reaction with their prescription medication. And the elderly in the study were not at all aware of the risk they were taking.

And then there are people who decide to double up on their prescription drugs. People like Martin Andrews of Cincinnati, Ohio. He was on medication for depression, and the pill he took every morning seemed to help some, but not enough. So



he decided to take two pills instead of one. Two days later he passed out when he got up during the night to go to the bathroom because the medication caused his blood pressure to drop.

"Unfortunately, it's not that uncommon," says Linda Heighnes, a home care nurse in Cincinnati. "Patients assume if medication helps them, then they can take more and it will help them even more."

There is yet another medication problem to watch for. "I have patients who will share medication with other family members," Linda tells us. "That's a big no-no. Just because it helps you, doesn't mean it will help your wife. She might be allergic, it might react with medication she's already taking—there could be all kinds of problems."

All kinds of problems is right. Mixing the wrong medications is bad news. Depending on the drugs, you can end up with ulcers, seizures or heart failure. Sometimes it can be deadly.

So how can you keep your loved one safe?

Start by checking out their medicine cabinet. I was shocked to discover that

my grandma had a whole kitchen cupboard full of over-the-counter medications. She had plenty of Alka-Seltzer, of course, but she also had Tylenol, Excedrin, aspirin, ibuprofen, three kinds of cold medicine, cough syrup, milk of magnesia, and a bottle of Tums.

She would mix and match this stuff, and take it along with her five prescription medications that she kept on the lazy Susan on the kitchen table. It was time to clean house.

She kept old prescription drugs, too. If she didn't finish an antibiotic as prescribed, she would save the remainder. The next time she felt sick, instead of going to the doctor, she would take some of the old pills, thinking that she knew best. Some of them were expired (most prescription drugs expire after one year), but I don't think she realized that. So here was Grandma, sick and helping herself to a partial course of expired antibiotics without even knowing what was really wrong with her.

I should add that my grandma grew up during the Great Depression. I believe she saved things as a result. She stockpiled pills the same way she did food and other household goods. It's not uncommon among the elderly and something all caregivers should watch for.

The moral of this story? Limit the number of over-the-counter medications you keep on hand. Ask your loved one's doctor or pharmacist which pain reliever is safe for them to use. If they need an antacid or cold medicine, ask about that too. But don't stockpile medications.

Always read the fine print on the

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Caregiver Brain Fitness

Trying No-Sweat Workout to Save Your Mind in Old Age

By Lori Zanteson

Fitness has a new game. It's no longer just about the body; the latest fitness focus is the mind. That's because we can strengthen our brains and get amazing, long-lasting results—no sweat required.

This is great news for caregivers who often see firsthand the result of aging and disease on the brain of a loved one. A little intervention now may stave off or even prevent these effects as caregivers age.

In fact, caregivers stand to benefit immensely from brain fitness. Not only are they reminded daily of the results of the brain's degeneration in those they care for, but caregivers are more at risk for a prematurely aging brain. This is because they are more likely than other segments of the population to suffer from stress and depression. Prolonged exposure to adrenal steroid hormones—like cortisol, which are released during stress—can damage the brain and block the formation of new neurons which are key to capturing new memories in our brains.

Chronic stress, anxiety, depression, aging, decreasing estrogen, excess oxytocin, and prolonged cortisol all can decrease brain fitness. Studies published in the *Journal of Immunology* note actual changes in the chromosomes of Alzheimer's disease caregivers, which amounted to a shortened lifespan of between four and eight years. This shows just how much the body's cells aged in these caregivers.

Testing even found that in severe cases, caregivers take on the symptoms of the person they are caring for. For example, caring for a person with dementia



will lead to memory loss.

Unlike Alzheimer's, "Oldtimers' is contagious," says Ann in Virginia. "The more time I spend with Mom, the more it seems that my brain works like hers. Actually, it's just that the world keeps shrinking if you let it. That's why I try to find the good stuff—I search the Net to print off articles that Mom would approve. It does us both good."

Other caregivers also turn to the Internet to play brain-stimulating games like sudoku, crossword puzzles, and mahjong (see sidebar for examples).

Though we can't stop the aging process or change our genetic predisposition, we can slow or even reverse their effects on our mental capacity. That's good news! Scientists used to think we were born with all of the neurons we would have for our lifetime, and once they were lost, they could not be replaced. Not so.

Cognitive function can indeed be enhanced in normal mature adults.

According to a 2006 study published by the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA*, "The brain retains a lifelong capacity for plasticity and adaptive reorganization." This means that any decline in the brain should be at least partially reversible with a little focused effort.

All we need are a few simple lifestyle changes, according to Guy McKhann and Marilyn Albert, authors of *Keep Your Brain Young: The Complete Guide to Physical and Emotional Health and Longevity*. They conducted a study which tracked 3,000 people to determine what factors contribute to the maintenance of cognitive function. At the end of the 10-year study, some had maintained excellent mental function while others had not.

McKhann and Albert found that, "Those who maintained their mental abilities kept their minds active through such stimulating activities as reading books, doing crossword puzzles, using a computer, and going to lectures or concerts."

A 2003 study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* confirms that participation in leisure activities is associated with a lower risk of dementia. But, change is the key; it's not enough simply to do activities you've mastered. The way to gain brain fitness is through continuous learning of new skills and new abilities, and to adopt new hobbies and activities. Interestingly, McKhann and Albert support this premise, saying those who better maintain their mental abilities are less likely to be passively watching television.

Moving into her senior years, Leigh gets very creative in her attempt to stay brain healthy. Seeing the effects of dementia each day is all the motivation ►

KEEPING YOUR BRAIN HEALTHY

There are several sources of "brain food" to help keep us sharp as we meet our caregiving obligations and move into older age. Check these out:

ONLINE:

www.sharpbrains.com
brain teasers and challenges

www.sudoku.com
www.websudoku.com
the popular game

www.instantchess.com
www.chessmaniac.com
online chess

www.brainbashers.com
brain challenges and games

www.dmoz.org/Games/Puzzles/Brain_Teasers/
cryptograms, optical illusions, riddles

SOFTWARE PROGRAMS:

MindFit, downloadable from
www.positscience.com for \$129

Brain Fitness2.0, from
www.positscience.com for \$395

BrainAge and Flash, for Nintendo DS game system, about \$20 each

she needs. Plus, it's enjoyable. This getter began a new career as a teacher at age 60 and has even gone back to graduate school! Conversely, Samantha in Texas incorporates her mother in her brain fitness efforts. She has been tracing her family's genealogy, a project that sharpens her mind through research, while bringing wonderful memories back into her mother's life.

Though there are myriad brain fitness programs available, studies show that one of the best ways to keep the brain stimulated is to be socially active. People provide the most unpredictable encounters we can have, and these encounters exercise the brain. The more social contact we have, the better we may be at retaining mental sharpness.

Research shows that people who are socially active suffer less mental decline and live more active pain-free lives without physical limitations than someone

who is socially isolated. How socially active someone is, is actually a good way of predicting a person's health and independence in later years.

Having a positive outlook keeps our brains healthy and ready to learn. Research shows that people who stay mentally sharp into old age depend on self-efficacy, or a feeling of self-worth and purpose in our lives. It requires an ability to adapt to life's challenges without becoming overwhelmed by stress. High stress levels eat away at brain fitness and memory performance, so managing stress—especially in caregiving—is vital to staying positive and in turn, maintaining a healthy brain.

Brain fitness does require some attention to the body; after all, what's good for your body is indeed good for your brain. Eating well, shedding extra pounds, getting moderate exercise and adequate sleep are all vital to a healthy brain. Vegetables, for example, especially cruciferous and leafy vegetables, have a particularly positive effect on learning and memory, and those containing antioxidants (vitamins C, E or A) reduce oxidative damage to brain cells, combating aging and cognitive decline. B vitamins like folic acid actually lower homocysteine, a blood protein that is associated with Alzheimer's and other types of dementia.

Keep in mind that aging is not necessarily a process of decline and that, in fact, we improve in many ways as we age. Consider our gifts and capabilities such as problem solving, wisdom, and skills we've refined over the years (including the skills required for caregiving). Honing all of these while learning new ones is precisely how we keep our brains in good working order. ■

RESOURCES:

The Dana Foundation Guide to Brain Health,
www.dana.org

AARP Brain Health,
www.aarp.org/health/brain/

Third Age Brain Fitness,
www.thirdage.com/living/games/brainfitness/

Lori Zanteson is a California-based freelance writer. She specializes in topics related to families and can be reached at lorzanteson@verizon.net.

Self-Medicating by Seniors too Common, Always Dangerous *Continued from page 3*

packaging. Pay attention to any warnings about possible drug interactions. Take them seriously. Ask your loved one's doctor or pharmacist if you have questions.

Get rid of old, unfinished prescriptions. If your loved one is ill, they should go to the doctor to find out what's wrong and get the proper medication. And while they're there, they should ask what over-the-counter medications they can take

"Unfortunately, it's [over-medication] not that uncommon. Patients assume if medication helps them, then they can take more and it will help them even more."

—Linda Heighnes, home care nurse.

with the prescribed drug.

Remind them to take their prescription medication as it is prescribed. If they feel they need a higher dose, talk to their doctor. Don't just increase the dose without a doctor's approval. (Don't decrease the dose without a doctor's approval, either).

Never share medication with a family member. I know, I know, there are those pain pills left from when you had your root canal, and Dad's back hurts, and surely one or two of those pills won't hurt him. It's just not a good idea; you don't know how it will interact with Dad's heart medication. Trust me. Dad needs to take his bad back to a doctor because he might have a herniated disk and need something more than a pain pill. To be safe, your loved one should get their own fresh prescription each time they are ill.

Naturally, it's important for people to take an active role in their own health care, and that includes being involved in making decisions about medication. But in order to make the right decisions, one needs to have all the information. And we, as caregivers, should help make sure our elderly loved ones get the information they need and take simple steps to make sure their medications are safe. ■

Kelly Morris is a former social worker and home health and hospice worker whose writing has appeared in a number of health-related journals. She lives in Mansfield, Ohio, and can be reached at multihearts@hotmail.com

When There's Not Enough Saliva

Dealing with Common Elderly Dry Mouth Condition

By Paula Sanders McCarron

While nearly half of our elderly suffer from a dry mouth, the condition all too often goes undetected and therefore untreated.

Dry mouth, technically known as xerostomia, is not a disease but a condition that develops when the salivary glands in the mouth simply do not produce the saliva needed to keep the mouth moist and comfortable. It's not unusual to experience a dry mouth on occasion at any age, especially in times of stress or when nervous or upset.

But for the elderly, this constant feeling of "cottonmouth" is not a normal part of aging—and it can be dangerous if not treated. Xerostomia can result in weight loss, speech impairment, poor nutritional status, infection, and respiratory problems.

"One reason why xerostomia goes undetected is that Medicare pays nothing for the dental care of persons age 65 and over," says Dr. Helaine Smith, a dentist who maintains a practice in Boston.

Critical Need for Saliva

To better understand the problems inherent to dry mouth, it helps to know a bit more about how saliva helps our bodies stay healthy. Although saliva largely consists of water, it also contains more than 60 substances that help prevent bacterial infection, yeast infections and viruses of



the mouth. Saliva provides the lubrication and enzymes necessary for chewing, swallowing and digesting food. It also helps prevent tooth decay by washing away bacteria.

If you suspect that your loved one may suffer from xerostomia, Dr. Smith offers a few pointers on detection. "First, if you look into the mouth of a person who has xerostomia, you'll see that the mouth is bright red, the color of sunburn instead of the shiny, wet coral pink that we expect to see in a healthy mouth," she says. "The most common complaint for persons with xerostomia is that they feel their mouths are constantly dry. And they may complain that food feels 'big'

going down the throat."

Other symptoms of xerostomia may include any of the following: bad breath, cracked lips, dark colored urine, a tongue that is dry, raw or red; and/or a burning sensation in the mouth.

What causes the salivary glands to reduce or stop producing saliva, leading to dry mouth? Smoking, mouth breathing, or consumption of caffeinated beverages or alcohol can be causes of xerostomia, as can nerve damage to the mouth or throat from surgery, radiation therapy or chemotherapy.

Many Dry Mouth Causes

Xerostomia can be caused by an underlying health condition such as diabetes, arthritis, AIDS, Parkinson's disease or depression. It may also be an outcome of Sjoren's syndrome, an autoimmune disorder where the body cannot produce saliva or tears. If you see signs of xerostomia in your loved one, let their physician, as well as their dentist, know right away so any underlying disease can be identified and treated.

"Beyond these factors, there are over 450 medications, both prescription and over-the-counter, which can cause the problem of xerostomia," says Dr. Smith. Some of these medications include antidepressants, anti-Parkinson's agents, diuretics, pain relievers and anti-histamines. ►

On average, seniors in the United States use two to six prescription medications and one to three over-the-counter medications daily. Given this fact, the prevalence of xerostomia—up to 10% of the general population and as high as 46% of the elderly—should come as no surprise.

“Overall, geriatricians are attuned to good oral health. They check for problems with dentures, any sign of infection or recessed gums, poor nutritional status,” says Dr. Smith. “But if you’re an adult in your 40’s, 50’s and early 60’s then your primary physician never asks about oral health, and if you’re neglecting good oral care when you are younger, then everything is going to be so much more complicated when you are older—including the problems that come with xerostomia.”

Meds in Spotlight

Once detected, the first and best step in treating dry mouth is to request an evaluation of all medications, both prescription drugs and over-the-counter products your loved one currently uses. A review of medications may lead to changes that can help reduce or eliminate the problem of xerostomia.

Good dental care is also key to helping alleviate or eliminate the dry mouth condition. Brush, floss, and keep dentures clean. There are special brands of toothpaste and mouthwash that help fight bacteria and minimize gum irritation, so check for the best fighters.

To help increase saliva production, sugarless gums and candies are more helpful than simply drinking water. Some chewing gums contain the same enzymes as found in saliva and can aid in the digestion of food. Water does provide temporary relief, but it does not help to increase the production of saliva, the root problem of xerostomia.

Saliva Substitutes

Over-the-counter mouth sprays, gels or lozenges are often helpful, and many contain calcium or fluoride for tooth protection. These saliva substitutes, or oral lubricants, can increase comfort as they effectively moisten and lubricate. But again, like water, they do not enable the body to increase its production of saliva.

To achieve greater amounts of saliva

production, there are prescription medications that effectively work on the glands responsible for the production of saliva. But keep in mind that achieving maximum benefit from these medications may take up to three months.

Even if the signs of xerostomia are not present in your aging parent, Dr. Smith advises that older adults continue to have regular check-ups for dental care. “With people living longer than ever, it’s important to maintain good oral care to avoid problems in the future,” she says. “In my practice, I look at a 70-year-old man and think: What can I do to help this person to be comfortable for the next 20 years—because the chances are good that’s how long he’ll live.” ■

Paula S. McCarron has more than 20 years of experience in health care, including nursing homes and hospice. She lives in Chelmsford, Massachusetts, and can be reached at paulamccarron@gmail.com.

COMING UP IN APRIL

- What caregivers fear. From disease conditions passed along genetically to fearful late-night phone calls bringing the worst news, already-stressed caregivers have a litany of reasons to fear life.
- The bathroom can be the most dangerous room in the house, especially for the elderly. In this installment of our series *Solutions for Keeping Loved Ones Independent*, we offer tips for helping your loved ones stay safe while bathing, toileting, and grooming.
- Excessive worry and repeated actions or thoughts can dot the daily landscape for our elderly. Learn what to look for and how to react when Mom exhibits what seems like OCD—obsessive compulsive disorder.
- Diabetes and dementia. A look at the dangerous intersection of these fast-growing diseases that are wracking our elderly population and further complicating our caregiving.

Coping While Caring for More Than One Loved One at a Time

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weren’t understood. To avoid these emotionally draining and time-consuming problems later, make sure that your loved ones have legally executed wills, as well as living wills and directives that specify their wishes regarding medical and end-of-life care. Make extra copies of all legal documents, and safeguard originals in a bank safety deposit box.

Obtain power of attorney sooner rather than later, because once loved ones start to fail they may be unable to execute documents that will allow you to sign checks or make decisions on their behalves.

Find out about Services

They say that knowledge is power. When caregiving for two or more, power can mean knowing immediately where to turn for help when you need it. Karen concurs, saying that the one thing she would have done differently was to find out what services were available to help her before she found herself already immersed in and nearly overwhelmed by her caregiving responsibilities.

To find out about caregiving programs and services in your community, contact the Area Agency on Aging Eldercare Locator at (800) 677-1116. They have information about volunteer caregiving programs, home care providers, adult day care, Meals on Wheels, senior centers, and other local services.

Caring for more than one person at a time will definitely have its challenges. Your time, energy, and patience will be stretched by snafus and emergencies. But there is much that you can anticipate and plan for. Thinking about these possibilities and preparing for them early on can save you time, headaches and heartaches down the road, and can help you manage through a very challenging time. ■

Melissa A. Goodwin is a freelance writer and photographer living in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She has years of experience working with volunteer caregiving programs that help seniors and family caregivers. She can be reached at meesarj@msn.com.

