Long-distance Caregiving

Family members often move to different cities as young adults follow job opportunities and parents retire to warmer climates. As a result, when parents get older and more dependent, adult children often have to face the issues of caregiving, sometimes from a long distance. Managing a parent’s care this way can be harder than providing care personally.

When you are caring for parents from a distance, it is easy to feel overwhelmed and guilty about not being able to be there in person. It can also be hard to tell when you need to deal with a problem in person. Some emergencies such as medical problems or accidents are obvious. But you and your parents may not worry about the same things.

You can take steps to make long-distance caregiving easier. Talk with your parents and other family members to find out what your parents need. Think about social contact, help with daily chores, help with bathing, dressing, or cooking, help paying bills, transportation, and medical checkups. Use the phone and the internet to find local organizations that can help. Take notes on the services they offer and how to enroll your parents in the program.

Identify important people whom your parents can call when you can’t be there. Friends, neighbors, and clergy may be willing to help. Also collect important information in case an emergency happens. List your parents’ medical conditions or medications, along with names and phone numbers of doctors. Write down your parents’ financial information including their bank or
other financial holdings, credit card information, a list of assets and liabilities, yearly income and expenses, and a statement of net worth. Keep important documents like the Social Security card, birth certificate, will, and insurance policy together in a safe place.

When you are able to visit your parent, pay close attention. Is she eating well, are her finances in order, and does her home look safe? Include time to have fun and enjoy each other’s company. An “all-business” visit isn’t good for you or your parents.

Remember to be sensitive to your parents’ views. If you are using outside services, explain that the services will help them stay independent. Tell them how the services will work. Think ahead of time about how your parents may react and how you will respond. They may be more willing to accept help if you suggest that it is a favor to you.

Also take care of yourself. Remember that you cannot provide all the help your parents need. Give yourself credit for the help you can give, and ask for help from other family members when you need it. Be sure to take care of your health by eating right, exercising, and getting enough sleep.

Reference: “Long-distance Caregiving.” AARP

Your Resources

Preventing Falls

Each year, about one-third of people over 65 fall. Even though only 15% of these falls cause an injury requiring medical attention, the risk of further injury becomes greater. Forty percent of nursing home admissions are related to falls. Several steps can be taken to help prevent falls and therefore increase the overall wellness and prolonged independence of older people.

Many physical factors associated with aging contribute to falls. Illness, loss of vision, and decreased reaction time are some common ailments that often accompany aging and can increase risk of falling. Diseases like arthritis, osteoporosis, Parkinson’s disease, glaucoma and muscular degeneration can create decreased reaction time as well as a better need
for lighting. Most falls occur on stairs, so adding more lighting to these areas is good prevention. Balance disorders, strokes, and medications can also increase the risk of falls. Some physical therapy may help stroke patients regain balance and a physician should be able to help with balance disorders. If medications are the cause of balance problems or dizziness, talk with your doctor about alternative treatments or dosages. Increased physical activity is a good way to prevent falls by building up muscles and flexibility.

Other causes of falls are primarily environmental. Most falls occur in or near the home, often on stairs, in the bathroom, and in the bedroom at night. Low lighting, slippery surfaces and clutter can also contribute to a fall. Preventative measures include installing bars or supports in bathrooms, using non-slip rugs, taping down cords and using nightlights. When out and about, keep an eye out for uneven pavement or sidewalks.

Some behaviors common among older people can also reduce the risk of falling. By remembering to use caution when entering dark or very light areas, facilitating handrails, grab bars in the shower and proper footstools, one can avoid potential accidents. Half of older individuals who fall do so more than once. Because of this, fear is a common factor that can reduce activities and result in a loss of muscle function. A fear of falling can be reduced by taking these precautions. Some physical therapists even recommend practicing getting up after a fall in the event that one occurs. In sum, preventative measures can greatly reduce the chance of a fall, therefore improving quality of life and independence.

Resource: Healthy People, Healthy Communities Newsletter, 2001

Your Health

“B” Good to Your Body

Folate and vitamin B₁₂ are two of the many B vitamins we need for good health. Folate is a B vitamin necessary for cell development. Folic acid refers to synthetic or man-made folate. Folate is rich in foods such as legumes, leafy green vegetables, and orange juice. In 1998, the Food and Drug Administration ordered that folic
acid to be added to grain foods such as bread, pasta, and rice. Ready-to-eat cereals may have up to 100% of the Daily Value for folic acid.

Our bodies absorb folic acid, the synthetic form of folate, better than folate from food. Eating a well-balanced diet with plenty of fruits, vegetables, and grains ensures that you will get enough folate. Folic acid supplements are not necessary for most people thanks to the fortification of grain foods.

Vitamin B₁₂ is another important B vitamin. Vitamin B₁₂ is mainly found in meats, eggs, and dairy products. The current Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) for adults is 2.4 µg/day. The National Academy of Sciences’ Institute of Medicine recommends that people over age 50 take a supplement with a synthetic form of vitamin B₁₂. Like folic acid, the synthetic form of vitamin B₁₂ is better absorbed. In food, vitamin B₁₂ is bound to protein and requires separation in our stomach before being absorbed. As we age, we sometimes don’t make enough stomach acid to separate the B₁₂ from the protein. Medicines that make the stomach less acid, such as antacids, may also reduce vitamin B₁₂ absorption. Ten to 30% of people over the age of 50 may absorb protein-bound vitamin B₁₂ poorly. Synthetic vitamin B₁₂, however, is not bound to protein and is more easily absorbed. You can get synthetic vitamin B₁₂ from fortified food and/or supplements.

Vitamin B₁₂ deficiency can also be caused by a lack of intrinsic factor, a compound produced by our body to help us absorb vitamin B₁₂. Vitamin B₁₂ deficiency due to lack of intrinsic factor is less common, affecting only about 2% of older people. Persons who lack intrinsic factor may develop pernicious anemia. Pernicious anemia cannot be treated with oral vitamin B₁₂; treatment requires Vitamin B₁₂ injections. Vitamin B₁₂ deficiency, whether due to poor absorption of protein-bound vitamin B₁₂ or lack of intrinsic factor, may lead to anemia and changes in the brain and nervous system (see following box).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brain and Nervous System Disorders Due to Vitamin B₁₂ Deficiency</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Numbness and tingling in the hands and feet</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Sensory loss</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Lack of muscle coordination</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Dementia</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Psychiatric disorders</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Impaired memory</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Impotence</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Because vitamin B₁₂ deficiency is difficult to diagnose, it is important to
prevent it by taking a vitamin $\text{B}_{12}$ supplement. Prevention is critical because many of the brain and nerve disorders caused by a deficiency cannot be reversed.

Both folate and vitamin $\text{B}_{12}$ may have a role in preventing heart disease. Homocysteine (homo-sis-teen) is an amino acid made from the breakdown of protein in the body. High blood levels of homocysteine may be a risk factor for heart disease. Folate and vitamin $\text{B}_{12}$ along with another B vitamin, vitamin $\text{B}_{6}$, can reduce blood levels of homocysteine and may reduce the risk of heart disease.

In addition to its role in heart disease prevention, folate may also play a role in cancer prevention, particularly prevention of colorectal cancer.

So “B” good to your body and eat a well-balanced diet to obtain adequate folate, and consider taking a vitamin $\text{B}_{12}$ supplement to ensure good health.

**Ginger-Glazed Pork Chops**

4 4-oz pork loin chops
2 tablespoons honey
1 tablespoon water
2 tablespoons light soy sauce
2 tablespoons sliced green onion
1/2 teaspoon ground ginger
2 teaspoons cornstarch
1 clove garlic, minced

1. Trim fat from meat. Place chops on the unheated rack of a broiler pan. Broil 3 to 4 inches from heat for 8-10 minutes or until no pink remains and juices run clear, turning once. Transfer to a platter.
2. For glaze, in a saucepan combine honey, soy sauce, green onion, ginger, cornstarch, and garlic. Cook and stir until thickened and bubbly. Cook and stir 2 minutes more. Spoon over chops. 4 servings

Serving suggestion: Serve over rice.

Nutrition Information:

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calories</td>
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<td>Carbohydrate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vitamin $\text{B}_{12}$</td>
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SENIOR SENSE is a quarterly publication provided by your local county Extension Service office. It is prepared by Extension Family & Consumer Sciences specialists at The University of Georgia specifically for the educational needs of older Georgians. This and earlier editions are available online at www.gafamilies.org.

Please contact your local Extension Service office for more information on these and related topics.

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