

# Preventing Caregiver Burnout

Caregiver burnout is a real thing — it's when you feel exhausted, both physically and mentally. This can happen when you try to do it all without getting the help or rest you need.

Taking care of young kids or a child with special health care needs can be intense. That's why it's so important for caregivers to take their own "time-outs" with a little "me time."

Taking a much-needed break will help you recharge, refresh, and be able to better care for your child.

## What Are the Signs & Symptoms of Caregiver Burnout?

Burnout happens over time. Because caregivers might not recognize it in themselves, other might see the signs first. These can include:

- changes in appetite and sleep patterns
- being less social than usual
- increased anxiety
- higher emotions (like crying a lot or being very irritable) or a lower emotional state (feeling empty or not concerned)

If you or someone else notices any of these signs or symptoms, take it seriously.

## How Can I Avoid Caregiver Burnout?

Here are 7 ways to help prevent caregiver burnout:

**1. Schedule breaks.** A few times each week, have a family member, friend, or health aide stay with your child for an hour or two so you can step away. Add it to your calendar just as you would with care visits for your child. That time is yours, so don't feel guilty about how you spend it. Nap, read, see a friend, go shopping, or do whatever else helps you relax. Your child will probably enjoy having someone else to talk with, and you'll feel refreshed when you get back.

**2. Exercise.** Most people find that exercise helps clear the mind, boost energy levels, and improve sleep. Even 20 minutes of brisk walking or bike riding a day can do the trick. If you can't get outside, follow along with a yoga or other exercise video. You can try to fit it in when your child's resting.

**3. Try to relax.** Each day (or whenever you can), find a quiet spot where you can spend 2 minutes. Even the bathroom will work. To feel calmer, give exercises like belly breathing a try: Breathe in through your nose, letting your belly puff out like a small balloon filling with air. As you breathe out through your nose, let your belly flatten. Take a few slow breaths this way.

Another exercise to try: Close your eyes and relax all your muscles, one by one. You can go from the tips of your toes to the top of your head. Don't forget to relax the muscles in your face, neck, and jaw. You may be storing a lot of tension there.

**4. Stay organized.** Medicine schedules, doctor's phone numbers, and bills can be a lot to keep track of. But if you stay organized, things can seem less stressful. Put all the information about your child's illness in one place. Consider using an app to keep everything together. You can check with your hospital system to see if it offers one for patients.

If you prefer to have hard copies, use a notebook, folder, or binder to gather all your notes and paperwork. When you think of questions for your doctor, jot them down right away so you won't forget.

Dealing with insurance companies can take a lot of time and effort. If you can, have your spouse, another trusted family member, or friend help keep it all straight.

**5. Ask for help.** Friends and family often want to help but might not be sure about what you need. If someone says, "If there's anything I can do..." and there is, say so. Running an errand, doing some laundry, or just sitting and listening to you talk about your day can benefit you and make a loved one feel useful.

**6. Find a support group.** Connecting with others who've been through similar situations can give you a chance to vent, feel less isolated, and learn helpful tips. Ask your child's doctor or nurse about local support groups related to your child's condition or caregiving in general. You also can find resources online, often by searching for your child's specific condition.

**7. Admit your feelings.** Accept your emotions — even if they're negative. For example, "I'm angry and frustrated, but that's normal because my child is sick." Try setting a 5-minute timer and simply notice your feelings. After the timer goes off, do something to switch gears and take control, like washing your face, playing your favorite song, or even walking into a different room.

No matter how much time and energy you spend on your child's care, you can't fully control their health and happiness. Admitting that some things are hard or beyond your control can help you feel less pressure.

## Where Else Can Caregivers Get Help?

If you feel like you may be going through caregiver burnout, depression, or anxiety, explain your feelings and symptoms to your doctor. It might help to see a counselor or therapist, especially one who specializes in caregiver needs. Medicines for anxiety or depression could be an option too.

Your doctor also may encourage you to take a break from your duties with **respite care**. This could include things like having another caregiver come to your home or enrolling your child in a drop-off day program. See what your insurance plan covers. If your child's care team includes a social worker, you can ask them for advice.

If you think you'll need time away from your job to help your child, ask the care team about the Family and Medical Leave Act. It lets many people in the U.S. take up to 12 weeks off work, either in a row or with "intermittent leave" (time off every once in a while).

Finally, know that you're doing your best. As you give your child time, attention, and love, give these to yourself as well.

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