

Health checklist for carers

Questions, answers and tips

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Does someone rely on your help? Are you looking after a friend or relative?

Then you may well be a **carer!**

How can this booklet help?

This booklet has been designed to help you to think about **your own** health and caring needs. The questions are for you to complete whenever you have a spare minute to yourself. You don't need to do it all in one go – you can always go back and complete another section at another time.

You might want to do it just for yourself – or you might wish to share the results with a health or social care professional – this will help them to help you.

What is meant by the term Carer?

Carers are people of all ages, including young carers, who provide regular unpaid help to relatives or friends due to frailty, mental or physical illness, addiction or disability.

The person being cared for may or may not live with the carer.

If this describes you, remember, you are not alone. One in eight of the population is a carer.

Do you find it difficult accepting help?

A carer's lifestyle is frequently restricted and many carers can and do become mentally and physically exhausted by their caring role. This can cause their own health to break down and this is why it is important for you to take stock of **your own** health.

Accepting help enables carers to become refreshed, avoids burn out and can give the person who is cared for the stimulation and pleasure of other people's company.

Let your GP know that you are a carer.

There is no need to feel guilty about accepting help.

Carers need to be healthy to care.

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1. Healthcheck – looking after yourself

The following questions will help you to think about your own health. Do you think you are healthy? Find out and see!

Tick either A, B or C for each question:			
	A: No	B: Sometimes	C: Yes
Do you have your health checked?			
Do you eat regularly (3 times a day)?			
Do you have a balanced diet? (see health tips)			
Do you eat high fibre foods?			
Do you have time for fun, study, friends and hobbies?			
Do you feel tired?	A: most of the time	B: occasionally	C: rarely
Do you smoke?	A: yes	B: occasionally	C: never
How often do you eat convenience foods? For example: takeaways, burgers, chips, crisps, chocolate, cakes.	A: daily	B: once or twice a week	C: occasionally
How many cups of fluid do you drink each day? (Include all non-alcoholic drinks, water, tea, coffee, milk, soft drinks.)	A: less than 8	B: 8 to 12	C: 12 or more
How often do you have your sight tested?	A: never	B: occasionally	C: regularly (every 2 years)

How much alcohol do you regularly drink? 1 unit = half pint beer, pub measure spirits, small glass sherry. 1 standard (175ml) glass wine contains 2.1 units.	A: Women over 14 units Men over 21 units (per week)	B: Women under 14 units Men under 21 units (per week)	C: Occasionally/never
How much are you sleeping? (in every 24 hours)	A: under 4 hours	B: 4 to 6 hours	C: 6 to 8 hours
Are you physically active for 15 minutes or more? For example: walking briskly, cycling, swimming, keep fit or dancing.	A: rarely or never	B: once a week	C: 2 to 3 times a week

How well did you do?

Mainly A's

Room for some lifestyle changes! **Why not have a chat with your community or practice nurse?**

Mainly B's

You would benefit from making some small changes to your lifestyle. **Have you read the health tips?**

Mainly C's

Excellent, your lifestyle is healthy. **Keep up the good work!**

Health tips

A health check involves checking.....

- Blood pressure
- Weight
- Urine
- A general discussion of health concerns.

Need advice? Talk to your GP or practice nurse.

Being physically active for 30 minutes 5 days a week will keep you active for life. This can be an enjoyable way to take a break, relieve stress and socialise. You are never too old to feel these benefits.

Meal times are an opportunity to relax. This aids digestion, helps reduce tension and increases energy. It is important to take meals regularly and remember breakfast is a good start to the day.

Your daily balanced diet should include.....

- 5 portions of fruit/vegetables every day
- Starchy foods, (breakfast cereals, potatoes, bread, chapatti, pasta, rice)
- Lean meat, fish, eggs, pulses, nuts
- Milk, cheese, yoghurt
- Butter, margarine, oils (used sparingly)

High fibre foods can help relieve constipation, lower cholesterol and control diabetes, e.g. wholemeal bread, chapatti, brown rice, pasta, peas, beans and lentils, fruit and vegetables and jacket potatoes.

Convenience food can be high in fats, salt, sugar and food additives – use sparingly!

Fluid intake – it is recommended that you drink 8 to 12 cups of non-alcoholic drinks every day to:

- Flush out the kidneys
- Prevent urinary infections
- Prevent constipation

You should drink even more in the hot weather. Tea and coffee are stimulants – if taken at bedtime they can keep you awake. Water is best.

Alcohol – sensible drinking guidelines

Drinkers are divided into 3 risk categories according to the amount of alcohol drunk 'regularly'. 'Regular' drinking means drinking every day or most days.

Risk level	Men – daily units	Women – daily units
Low-risk drinkers	No more than 3 – 4	No more than 2 - 3
Increasing-risk drinkers	More than 3 - 4	More than 2 - 3
Higher-risk drinkers	Regularly drinking 8 units daily or 50 weekly	Regularly drinking 6 units daily or 35 weekly

There are times when it is sensible not to drink – when driving, operating machinery or when taking certain medications, or when giving medication to others.

Regularly drinking too much can increase the risk of experiencing raised blood pressure, heart disease, stomach disorders, some cancers, sleeping problems, chronic fatigue, accidents, emotional and financial problems.

Smoking increases the risk of developing:

- Heart disease
- Lung disease (e.g. bronchitis, cancer)
- Osteoporosis (brittle bone disease)

Smoking affects other people (passive smokers). Want advice to give up?

Ask your GP surgery for advice.

Eyes: Recommendation – having you sight checked every 2 years helps to:

- Show the general state of your health
- Diagnose certain medical conditions
- Show whether you need glasses

It is free to some people (ask the optician). If you are housebound some opticians will visit customers at home.

For further information about healthy lifestyles, look at www.nhs.uk

2. General health

What health problems do you have that are worrying you?

If you have problems, there are things you can do to help yourself. Other things will need help from a professional – your GP, nurse or social services staff can advise.

Joints	Mobility difficulties or comments	Joint stiffness (tick)	Joint pain (tick)
Neck			
Arm			
Shoulders			
Hips			
Legs			
Hand			
Elbow			
Back			
Knees			
Feet			

Suppleness exercises help stiff joints. Various activities are available at your local leisure centre and there may be supervised sessions that you can be referred to by your GP to improve your health.

If you are unable to find time to get away, home-based exercise tips are available – ask your practice nurse. Remember that walking is good for you.

If you are concerned about your health, seek advice from your GP before becoming more active.

Health tips

Dental checks are recommended.....

- Every 6 months for natural teeth
- Annually for dentures (well fitting dentures aid digestion)

The dentist can give advice and spot....

- Tooth decay and gum disease
 - Early mouth cancers
-

Difficulty sleeping? Have you tried....

- Relaxing in a warm bath
 - Bedtime snack or glass of milk
 - Soothing music/light reading
-

Diabetes - symptoms of the disease can include:

- tiredness
- intense thirst
- frequency of urine
- significant weight change

Diabetes is more common amongst older people, especially if overweight. These symptoms occur for other reasons but diabetes should be taken seriously – consult your GP if in doubt.

Common symptoms of Menopause you may overlook

- hot flushes/night sweats
- poor concentration
- loss of interest in, or painful sex
- tiredness/anxiety/irritability

Most symptoms will pass in time. Contact your GP for treatment and advice if symptoms are troublesome.

3. Health problems

What health problems are worrying you?

Do you have time for:

- Study, friends, hobbies?
- How about a relaxing swim, listening to music or painting?

Have your problems increased since you became a carer?

- A problem detected early can often be treated easily.
- If you have not already discussed these problems, make an appointment for a health check with your GP's surgery.

Put a tick in the appropriate box if you have any of these health conditions.

	Yes	No
Arthritis		
Migraine/headaches		
Sight difficulties (even with spectacles)		
Hearing difficulties		
High blood pressure		
Fainting/giddy attacks		
Heart problems		
Breathing difficulties (including asthma)		
Diabetes		
Recent weight fluctuation (including loss/gain)		
Sleeping difficulties		
Continence difficulties (dribbling, frequency, pain, leaking)		
Family planning/problems with intercourse		
Menopause/Prostate problems		

List here any other health problems you are worried about:

Health tips

Foot problems

- Calluses and corns
- Ingrowing toenails
- Poor circulation
- Fungal infections

Feet must not be neglected. Remember, well-fitting shoes, stockings or socks are important – seek advice from your local chiropodist.

Prostate awareness

- Difficulty in passing water
- Slow flow
- Dribble before reaching the toilet
- Frequent urge to pass water
- Wetting the bed – a full bladder can overflow

Talk to your GP or Continence Advisor – they will decide if you need specialist help.

Continence

- Leaking on physical exertion
- Getting up in the night to visit the toilet
- Getting to the toilet too late
- Wetting the bed

Incontinence is an embarrassing, common problem. It can affect anyone at any age. Significant help can be given.

4. What medication are you taking?

This section gives you an opportunity to take stock of the regular medication you are taking (including vitamins, tonics, creams etc).

Medication (name)	GP Prescribed (please tick)	Self Prescribed (please tick)	Reason for taking

- If you regularly need to buy non-prescription medication, it is advisable to discuss this further with your GP/Practice Nurse.
- Make sure you understand why you are taking medication and how it works.
- Keep medication in a dry, cool and preferably locked cabinet, out of reach of young children and confused people.
- Remember to regularly check medication labels for out of date medicines – any unused medicines should be returned to your pharmacist.
- If you suspect you have having any side effects from a prescribed medicine, telephone your GP surgery for advice before discontinuing.

Further advice is available from your Pharmacist, GP or Practice Nurse.

5. Mental and emotional well-being

Looking after your stress levels

Just being a carer often means that you are faced with constant stress. Carers have so many extra responsibilities and frustrations to deal with.

Stress is the reaction that people have to excessive pressure or other types of demand placed on them. It arises when they worry that they cannot cope.

Not all stress is bad. We all need some stress in our lives to function effectively. Some people thrive on stress – it makes them feel stimulated and excited.

Changes in your mental well-being

However, continual or excessive stress can lead to disturbed sleep, poor concentration, increased anxiety and irritability, which can increase the risk of accidents and disrupt relationships at both work and home. An overloaded carer can become physically or mentally ill.

It is important to be aware of and identify any symptoms of excessive stress. These might include:

- Smoking more
- Drinking more alcohol
- Drinking more coffee, which will make you more irritable and make it harder for you to sleep
- Anxiety and feeling restless and edgy
- Insomnia and poor sleep
- Constantly feeling tired and lacking in energy
- Difficulty concentrating
- Feeling down and unhappy a lot of the time
- Feeling like there are not enough hours in the day
- Loss of self esteem and confidence
- Lack of interest in doing activities that used to interest you
- Feelings of loneliness and isolation
- Physical tensions (e.g. in neck and back)
- Lack of appetite, eating too much or too little

- Irritability and aggressiveness
- Feelings of resentment that can put a strain on the relationship with the person you are caring for, or on your other relationships, and can leave you with negative or guilty feelings
- Palpitations
- Panic attacks
- Strange and worrying thoughts or experiences
- Behaviour that is neglectful of yourself, excessive risk-taking, or thoughts of harming yourself

No matter how well you deal with your caring role, at some point you will probably experience higher than normal levels of stress.

Improving your mental and emotional well-being

Carers can be so busy caring for the health and well-being of the person that they care for that they don't take time for themselves. Taking care of your own mental and emotional well-being is not just vital for yourself, it can also be very positive for the person you care for.

Early recognition of the signs of stress, anxiety and depression is the crucial first step in dealing with problems and preventing them becoming more serious. Seek help as soon as possible through your GP or practice nurse.

There are things you can do for yourself to improve your own mental and emotional well-being, which can include:

- Drawing on friends and family for discussion and support – talk about your feelings, don't bottle them up
- Work out what is making you stressed or upset
- Organise your time – make lists
- Find out about practical solutions for things that you have troubling you – contact the York Carers Centre, or Citizens Advice Bureau for advice about benefits, entitlements, debt counselling and many other practical things
- Keep physically active and take regular exercise – start with a brisk walk
- Only drink alcohol in moderation (see page 6 of this booklet for guidelines, also www.nhs.uk/livewell/alcohol)
- Eat well (see page 5 of this booklet for guidelines, also www.nhs.uk/livewell/healthy-eating)
- Learn new skills

- Do something creative
- Getting in touch with local carers' support groups in the York area, or carers' forums on the internet
- Take a break – find out about carers' respite resources (talk to York Carers Centre)
- Seek help and advice from your GP, practice nurse, pharmacist and other health professionals you may know
- Ask for help – don't try to do everything yourself

6. Further help and advice

If you need further help?

Talking to someone who understands often helps. If you need someone to talk to or confide in, contact your Practice Nurse. If necessary they will refer you to your GP.

York Carers Centre offers free advice and information that will help you find the support that suits you best. Other services include the Carers Emergency Card, support for young carers (8 to 18) and young adult carers (18 to 25), and for carers of people affected by substance misuse .

Call **(01904 715490)**

City of York Council offers Carers Assessments of Need and other support.

- York Customer Centre general number **01904 551550**
- Adult Social Care Services on **01904 555111**
- Children's Social Services on **01904 551900**

Carer led support groups in York:

York Carers Forum is run by unpaid carers to support and raise the profile of unpaid carers and former carers in the York area. They have a monthly newsletter and regular monthly meetings and socials. Call **01904 422437**

CANDI is the forum for parents and carers whose children have disabilities and/or additional needs. Call **0775 1828369**

Young Carers Revolution is the forum for young carers in York. For more information go to: www.youngcarersrevolution.wordpress.com

If you don't live in the City of York area, please contact your local Carers Centre and/or local council.

What other advice do you need?

Completing the following chart may be useful. You could show it to your GP or use it to help work out the kind of support you need.

	Your answer
Who are you caring for e.g. relative/friend? How old are they?	
How long have you been a carer?	
Are you combining paid work with caring?	
What kind of health conditions does the person have that you are caring for e.g. stroke, dementia, multiple sclerosis, learning difficulties, mental illness?	
On average, how often are you disturbed at night by the cared for person?	
What help do you give, e.g. shopping, cooking, housework, laundry, feeding, toileting, washing, dressing, walking, wheelchair outings, emotional support, supervising/protection among other things?	
What help do you have to give you a break from caring, e.g. day centres/clubs, family, friends, Social and voluntary services?	
What additional help (if any) do you need?	
You may become financially stretched through loss of earnings and changes in personal circumstances. Has anyone discussed with you the financial effects of your caring role and the benefits you and the person you care for may be able to get?	

Do you worry what might happen to the person you care for if you are unable to provide care because of an emergency? You can put a plan in place before hand and get a **Carers' Emergency Card** through York Carers Centre.