

Tips for the Long-Distance Caregiver

Of the 34 million Americans who care for older family members, roughly 15 percent are long-distance caregivers. These caregivers live at least an hour's drive from their older relatives, typically their parents. Some caregivers are helping to care for siblings.

Many caregivers also work and some are raising children at the same time. And others juggle all three roles. If you're caring for an older person from a distance, here is a checklist to help you through this process.

- Schedule a family meeting**
You and other family members should discuss what your older relative needs, who can help, and in what ways. Have the meeting by phone or Internet if that is easier.
- Choose a primary caregiver**
A primary caregiver's job is to look at the big picture and help ensure that the older relative is getting the care he or she needs. You and your family can choose who the primary caregiver should be at the family meeting. To avoid caregiver burnout, consider taking turns being the primary caregiver, if possible.
- Share responsibilities among family members, if possible**
You and other family members can take turns visiting and taking care of chores for your older relative. You can also take turns checking in by phone. Family members who live far away can still help. Maybe they can pay for a weekly housekeeping service or another type of help.
- Hire a Geriatric Care Manager**
Geriatric Care Managers are licensed nurses or social workers who specialize in the care of older people. They can evaluate an older person's needs. They can also find and coordinate the necessary services in their communities. See www.caremanager.org for more information.
- Look into house call services**
If your older relative needs regular medical care, but is too frail to travel to a physician's office, look into house call visits. These are usually covered by Medicare. Various agencies, such as local hospitals, may offer them in your area. You can search on the Internet by typing this phrase – "physician house calls" + elderly + your zip code – in your Web browser.
- Ask the older person to appoint a power of attorney**
A power of attorney allows a designated person to make decisions on behalf of the older adult if he or she is unable to do so. This can be important for the older relative to have his or her wishes considered for decisions about health care, finances and legal needs.



Ask the older person to report any changes

Any changes in managing daily activities should be reported. to you and the healthcare provider. These changes can include:

- using the toilet
- getting dressed
- bathing
- walking
- getting in and out of a chair or bed
- managing finances
- driving
- using the phone
- managing medicines
- cooking food
- grocery shopping



Ask others for help

If the older adult has friendly neighbors, ask them if they can help keep an eye out for the older person. Ask members of a local senior center, church, temple, mosque, or other faith-based organizations for help as well.

Use the Eldercare Locator to find a range of senior-friendly services. You can find it at www.eldercare.gov or call 800-677-1116.



Get the older person an “emergency call button” or a specialized phone

The button will send a message to an emergency service if the user pushes it. A special cell phone designed just for older adults may be easier to use than a regular smart phone.



Have someone check food storage areas

Your older relative may not be aware when food has spoiled or is past its expiration date. The refrigerator, freezer, and pantry should all be examined on a regular basis to prevent any problems.



Remember to take care of yourself

Being a caregiver can be demanding – especially when you’re doing it from a distance. Make sure you take care of yourself too. Try joining a caregiver support group in your community or look online for more support and tips. You can find these on the Eldercare Locator.

Visit www.HealthinAging.org for more caregiver resources, including tips on avoiding caregiver burnout.