

CARERS FACT SHEET 4

Your Health Matters

You and your health

It is natural to be mostly concerned for the health of the person you care for, but you must remember that you need to look after yourself as well – after all, if you continue to be healthy, you will be able to offer better care for longer.

Your doctor

Make sure you know what your doctor's surgery provides – ask for the practice leaflet. Remember, even if you have a health visitor or district nurse coming to you regularly, you are still entitled to visit the doctor yourself if you need to.

You should make sure that your doctor knows you are a carer. Caring itself can produce physical or emotional stresses, and remember that sacrificing your health for the benefit of the person you care for will help neither of you in the long run. Your doctor is required to recognise and respond to your needs as a carer as well as, wherever appropriate, involving you in discussions about the person you care for.

Your doctor must maintain the confidentiality of the person you care for, so expect to be frustrated sometimes if you can't find out all the information you would like. If this becomes a problem, though, try talking it through with the person you care for and visiting the doctor together, or ask your health visitor or district nurse for help.

Other Health Issues

Remember, you have a right to good health information. There are many specialist health services, listed in the Guide to Care at Home, which your doctor can help you access, but some are available privately.

If you choose to have private podiatry (foot care), make sure you see someone with the initials SRCH after their name – you can find these listed in Yellow Pages.

One of the most difficult health issues to deal with is the loss of continence – remember that most types of incontinence can be improved and all can be made more comfortable, so do speak to your health visitor or district nurse about support.

One in six of us will speak to our doctor about a mental health problem at some time in our lives. Although everyone may be absent-minded at times, a marked or progressive change in the cared-for person's mental state should be taken seriously and you should seek advice. Mental health problems may have a physical cause such as an incontinence problem, an allergy, an illness, an infection or a reaction to drugs - often in such cases significant improvements can be made.

However, a progressive deterioration in someone who cannot think clearly or logically or who is losing their memory, whose personality is changing or who cannot carry out normal tasks may mean a dementia is occurring. You should seek advice urgently from your doctor. Many dementias cannot yet be cured but can be helped with the right treatment. Dementia is not just a problem for older people but can be for some younger people too.

However there are many useful booklets on dementia as well as specialist advice and support.

Your role of carer may bring about changes to your relationship with the person you care for and with other people. All caring takes place because of a pre-existing relationship, but, while caring can bring real satisfaction, it can also produce difficulties. You may need to look after your emotional health as well as your physical health.

You may also need to cope with changing roles, especially with the difficulties of caring if the relationship was previously not easy. You may feel guilty at not being able to manage, or have competing loyalties. You may find difficulties with other members of the family who do not know how to help or refuse to do so.

As with all health and welfare related matters, it may be that you choose to seek private help, in which case, you need to be sure what your policy allows you to claim for. Check with your insurance provider, if you have one, especially if you took out your policy some time ago – the cover may have changed.

Contingency/Emergency plan

The carer should have in place an emergency plan with contingency arrangements in the event of having an accident or being delayed when out.

A 'Carers Card' carried with them would be useful, as would the telephone number of their GP and Social Worker. The card should NOT carry the address of the carer or their contacts for safety reasons.

A range of possible actions in different circumstances should be examined.

Particular action should be made where children are part of the family