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# **Taking Care Of The Caregiver Of Alzheimer's Sufferer**

"I am what I ate ... and I am frightened." - Bill Cosby

For the past several weeks I have been taking better care of myself through daily yoga practice, meditating, eating more mindfully and taking in less caffeine.

I always stress the importance of self-care to the caregivers I encounter. I share with them that family members giving care to someone with a dementia such as Alzheimer's disease often experience their own health problems due to stress.

According to the Alzheimer's Association, family caregivers are more likely to report their health is in poor condition than non-caregivers. Caregivers are also more likely to have high levels of stress hormones, inhibited immune systems, slow wound healing, hypertension and coronary heart disease.

I have seen reports that spousal caregivers will often die before the person with Alzheimer's disease due to these factors. Yet, I am sure the thought many of you have is "how do I find time for self-care?" In past blogs we have written about support groups and respite care which are vitally important to a caregiver's well-being. But what about caregiver nutrition?

According to the "American Journal of Alzheimer's Disease and Other Dementias," approximately one-third to one half of the health problems older people encounter are indirectly or directly related to dietary deficiencies. Combine that with the fact that caregivers' lives are stressful, and it is not surprising they are likely to neglect their own nutritional needs.

Just what would optimal caregiver nutrition look like? In my mind, it would need to meet the needs of the older adult, incorporate foods that are good for the brain, and most importantly be simple.

Nutritional experts at Tufts University developed a Senior Food Guide Pyramid that emphasizes eating patterns that are necessary for good health for older adults. An important feature in the pyramid is its base, which displays a row of eight glasses of water or other non-caffeinated liquids. As we grow older, the importance of keeping well hydrated cannot be overstated. That would be my first suggestion for caregiver nutrition.

When it comes to the food we eat, there is encouraging research demonstrating that eating more omega-3 fatty acids may help reduce stress and inflammation in the body, which are associated with numerous chronic diseases that become more common as we age. It has also been reported that omega-3 fatty acids may help reduce the risk of memory loss by stimulating the growth of neuron connections, which improves the brain's ability to process and retrieve information.

High omega-3's are found in some fish. The American Heart Association (AHA) recommends eating fatty fish such as mackerel, lake trout, herring, sardines, albacore tuna and salmon. The AHA also recommends including tofu and other forms of soybeans, walnuts, flaxseeds and nut and canola oils as a way to increase amounts of alpha-linolenic acid, which produces omega-3 fatty acids in our bodies.

Another word we hear a lot of these days is antioxidants. Antioxidants are found in fruits, vegetables and grains and help in preventing "free radical" destruction of cells that leads to aging. Studies show that high antioxidant intake from foods results in reduced rates of cancer, cardiovascular disease and macular degeneration often associated with aging.

Here are some foods you might start placing in your grocery cart the next time you're out shopping:

Fish, preferably the fatty fish (omega-3) such as mackerel, lake trout, herring, sardines, albacore tuna and salmon. Vegetables are high in disease-fighting nutrients. Fresh, frozen or canned vegetables are excellent sources, but particular winners are leafy greens (contain folate) such as spinach, kale, collard greens and mustard greens. Also brussels sprouts, broccoli, beets, avocados and red bell peppers. Berries have the highest antioxidant concentration among fruit. Blueberries contain flavonoids, the natural compounds that protect neurons from the negative effects of oxidation and inflammation. Others include blackberries, cranberries, strawberries and

raspberries.

As a caregiver you will feel limited some days in what you can do, but we all must eat. With a few minutes of thoughtful planning, your next trip to the grocery store can be a choice to improve your health. Ultimately, when you take time to care of yourself, good things happen - you avoid health problems, feel better about yourself, have more energy and are more likely to have a better outlook about your caregiving role. Free Medical Advice published By [Dr Vivienne Balonwu](#).

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