

Caring for YOUR Nutrition

Are you a family caregiver? You may not think of yourself that way, but if you spend time tending to the needs or concerns of a person with an ongoing illness, injury or disability you are considered a caregiver.

Approximately 85% of people with dementia and chronic illness are cared for exclusively in their own homes. On average, their loved ones provide 12 hours of assistance a day.¹ That can be difficult to juggle with work and other responsibilities, and it often takes an economic and physical toll. As a result, caregivers often report significant stress, depression, anxiety, and fatigue.

Caregiving also can take its toll on caregiver nutrition. Limited time to cook or shop may result in reaching for sweets or picking up fast food, which don't need a lot of preparation or advance planning. Nutrients that can fall short include protein and fluids, as well as fiber, vitamins and minerals from fruits and vegetables that may not be present in convenience items.

That leaves the caregiver at risk of malnutrition, and, in turn, more susceptible to the physical effects of stress. The good news is that eating a healthful diet can reduce the negative effects of stress. So, while caregivers are often rightfully focused on making sure they provide healthy meals for those they care for, it is very important for caregivers to keep their own nutrition and hydration at the top of their priority list.

How can you do this to your full list of items on your "to do" list? A good way to start a new habit is to take the first few steps first. Begin with drinking beverages at each meal and 2-3 times between meals. Examples of healthy drinks include: water, milk, juice (for those fruits/vegetables you may be missing), or non-sweetened drinks. Next, focus on protein, a key nutrient that builds strength and provides important minerals. Ways you can add protein to your day include:

- At meals, eat your protein first
- Snack on cheese
- Replace cereal with eggs
- Top your food with chopped almonds
- Choose Greek yogurt
- Have a protein shake
- Eat low/no fat dairy products
- Include a high-protein food like fish, chicken, beef, eggs with every meal
- Pair peanut butter or yogurt with fruit
- Try a variety of plant proteins like nuts, peanut butter, beans, and tofu
- Drink a liquid supplement like Ensure or Glucerna

To find more ideas for high protein foods, increasing fluids and other ways to prevent malnutrition, review this [National Institute on Aging resource](#), consult your healthcare provider, contact a dietitian, or go to reliable websites like the [Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics](#), [US Department of Agriculture](#) and the [National Council on Aging](#).

¹ Schneider J, Murray J, Banerjee S, Mann A. EURO CARE: a cross-national study of co-resident spouse carers for people with Alzheimer's disease: I--Factors associated with carer burden. Int J Geriatr Psychiatry. 1999 Aug; 14(8):651-61