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Heart Failure:

SecondsCount Caregiver Tips

As a caregiver for someone who has heart failure, you have a lot to do and a lot on your mind. The doctors and nurses at SecondsCount developed this list of suggestions for helping caregivers. It was designed to help you take care of yourself, get organized and help the person you love (and you) through this challenging time.

We invite you to print this list and use it as a checklist to get started. This list is by no means complete. Add to it and share it with others. It might be the ice-breaker you need for your next support group meeting.

Create a Hospital Packing List

Patients whose heart failure worsens suddenly will need to be admitted to a hospital. Creating a hospital packing list in advance can make an emergency trip to the hospital less stressful. Suggested items to include are the following: driver's license, insurance card, power of attorney, living will, list of medications, important phone numbers, robe, slippers, underwear, socks, pajamas, glasses, something to read or do such as puzzles, a book, music, a photo or other special keepsake, and earplugs. (This list was adapted from a list developed by Registered Nurse, Deborah Leader.)

Make a List of Medications

Leave a copy of your medications at home and carry one in your wallet. Include the following information: name of medication, dosage, how often each medication is taken and when it was last taken. You can list any allergies or medication intolerances on here also.

Check the House to See If It Needs to Be Adapted to Your Loved One's Needs

Talk with the person you are caring for about what he or she needs help with now. Some heart failure patients may find that they are weaker than before or have more trouble thinking and could benefit from simplified tasks. The patient's care team can advise as to what adjustments may be beneficial. Items such as bathtub grab bars, shower chairs or raised toilet seats can go a long way in helping people with heart failure maintain independence and perform daily activities in spite of their fatigue.

Find a Caregiver Support Group

Talking with others in the same situation can do a lot for your morale and give you other ideas and suggestions for making your way through day-to-day challenges. There are others who are facing the same challenges and achieving similar victories. Reach out to others and let others share your strength.

Take Time for Yourself

Find time now and then to do something for yourself, touch base with your network of family and friends and ask for help when you need it. Don't feel guilty about asking a friend or family member to stay with the person you care for so you can do even simple things such as get a haircut, go shopping or do a favorite activity. You have a right to care for yourself and being refreshed will in turn make you a better caregiver.

Get Some Rest

You have more to do these days. Chores and other activities that used to seem so important may have to wait now. Let them go and be easy on yourself. Also, adequate sleep may help guard against depression and burnout.

Eat a Healthy Diet

You may be so focused your loved one's care that you neglect to care for yourself. The person you are caring for will be advised to eat a heart-healthy diet with low sodium and little "bad" cholesterol. This diet will help give you the energy and good health you need as well.

Try to find dishes that you both enjoy. Make meals in batches and freeze some if that will help you throughout the week, find someone who can help you with cooking and, if you order out from a restaurant, ask questions about heart-healthy options, especially low-sodium choices. There are many good cookbooks and magazines that have delicious low sodium heart-healthy recipes and offer a lot of variety.

Don't Forget Exercise

It may seem like you don't have time for physical activity while caring for someone with heart failure. Find ways to incorporate it into your schedule. Consider it a caregiving measure for yourself and your loved one. Ask a friend or family member to stay with the patient while you go to a favorite class at a local gym or go for a walk or bike ride in the neighborhood. Establish a regular schedule for physical activity.

Set Boundaries

The person you are caring for may be struggling with depression, anger, anxiety and a whole range of emotions based on the heart failure diagnosis and any limits on his or her abilities. This is natural. Whether the patient is struggling with these emotions or not, you have the right to work toward your own happiness and safeguard your own health, without feeling guilty about it. Establish with the person you are caring for that you care for him or her and want to be there, and that you also need to set aside time for yourself. Again, this will help prevent burnout and make you a better caregiver for the long term.

Use the space below to add more tips:

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