

# PREVENTING PHYSICAL PAIN & INJURY FOR CARE PARTNERS

## Be Aware of Your Own Safety as Well

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As a person providing care for a loved one (whatever level that may be) you are an integral part of your loved one's healthcare team and the healthcare system in general. Your commitment and actions, though loving and necessary, do not come without cost. Providing care for a loved one takes a toll on the physical, mental and emotional well-being of people providing care. A 2022 Canadian paper on Caregivers shared that "that 69% of caregivers noted a deterioration in their mental health, over half reported a deterioration in their physical health, and 16% are more likely to live with two or more long-term health conditions. 1

Providing care for a loved one can include actions such as assistance with standing up, sitting down or transferring, assisting with care-related tasks like dressing, bathing or even taking on additional household tasks like snow shoveling or laundry. And while these types of tasks are not necessarily difficult, they do require a physicality that includes repetitive movements, bending, twisting, kneeling, etc. The person you are providing care for may also be larger than you and for most, there is no prior experience in proper lifting or transferring techniques. This can lead to not only stress, but physical injury. The most common physical injuries sustained by care partners? Lower back strains/sprains, shoulder and neck pain, wrist and hand injuries, knee pain, and chronic pain and fatigue.

### **What Can You Do to Help Prevent Injury?**

A large number of care partner injuries are caused by improper body mechanics when it comes to lifting and/or helping a loved one up or down. These instances can occur when assisting with day-to-day tasks such as getting out of a chair, bed, or the car, getting on/off the toilet, or during more serious events like a fall. In fact, according to the Public Health Agency of Canada, falls are the leading cause of injury among older Canadians resulting in 89% of injury-related hospitalizations, 85% of hip fractures and 30% of all long-term care admissions.<sup>2</sup>

To reduce your risk of injury, learning proper techniques and methods to handle physical aspects of providing care is essential. Both physiotherapists and occupational therapists are great resources to help you, and your loved one prevent and prepare for situations that have the potential to cause injury. Below are some general guidelines that can help you provide care for your loved one, without hurting them or yourself in the process.



## Smart Strategies for Your Health and Safety

- **Be prepared** – First, have a conversation with your loved one about the task at hand. What is needed? What role will you each have? Next, ensure the item(s) you need to assist with a specific care task are readily available/close at hand. Then keep communicating throughout the process until the task is complete. Teamwork makes any task easier!
- **Ask for Help** – Getting tips, tricks and “how-to’s” from physio- and occupational therapists can make a significant difference. While bringing in homecare can help with some of the trickier movements involved in bathing.
- **Lift smartly** - Always keep the person or object you are lifting close to your body and lift with your legs, which are stronger than any other part of your body. Keep your back straight (with its natural curve) and try to avoid twisting motions that take your body out of its natural alignment.
- **Get plenty of rest** - Adequate rest is a critical part of managing stress, and for most people, that means around seven to eight hours of sleep a night. When you sleep, your general energy consumption is lowered as, most of the time, your body and brain is at rest. This means more energy can be used to restore your bones and muscles.
- **Drink water** - When you’re dehydrated, the discs between your vertebrae can shrink and the nerves can become pinched, increasing pain, so drink plenty of water to help keep your muscles and discs hydrated.
- **Exercise** - Physical activity can strengthen muscles, reduce feelings of depression and stress, and help you improve your sleep and overall health.
- **Practice or take advantage of relaxation techniques** - Meditation, yoga, massage and breathing exercises are some of the easiest ways to relieve stress. Research shows that even just one hour a week can result in significant reductions in stress levels.

## Helping Someone Up from a Seated Position

1. Make sure that your feet are stable, and as close as possible to your loved one.
2. Face your loved one, slightly bend your knees and squat in preparation to lift. Tighten your abdominal muscles and keep your back straight (try not to curve forward). This will add lifting strength and increase power from your legs and arms.
3. Maintain a position as close to your loved one as possible so that excess strain is not placed on your back by leaning over.
4. Point your feet towards your loved one; and, if possible, place one foot in between their feet and one foot to the outside for optimal stability.
5. Attempt to lift using a smooth, flowing motion, pushing upward with leg muscles; keeping your shoulders and neck muscles as relaxed as possible.
2. Check for injuries like bruises, bleeding, swelling, possible sprains and potential broken bones.
3. Ask them if they are experiencing any pain, where it is located and how severe it is.
4. If there is any sign of serious pain or injury (ie: head injury/ broken bone) do not move them. Call 911 and keep your loved one as warm, comfortable and still as possible until help arrives.
5. If there is no sign of injury and your loved one feels they are able to get up, proceed slowly. Stop at any point if they become stuck, experience pain or become too tired to get all the way up.
6. Find two sturdy chairs and place one next to your loved ones' head and the other down by their feet.
7. Help your loved one roll over onto their side and support them in getting onto their hands and knees, position the chair placed by their head so that it is directly in front of them.

## Helping Someone Up After a Fall

When it comes to helping your loved one up it is important to keep in mind that your role is to help guide them through the following steps and keep them steady, not lift their weight. Your loved one needs to be capable of doing the physical work required to get up. If they cannot do this, it may be safer to call 911.

1. It is important to stay calm and help your loved one to remain calm. Taking slow, deep breaths can help.
10. Move the second chair directly behind your loved one, then ask them to use both their arms and legs to

push themselves up and sit back into the chair behind them. Use your hands to keep your loved one steady but keep your back upright and make sure they are doing the physical work to lift themselves.

11. Have your loved one stay seated until you and they are confident that they can stand and continue moving around without hurting themselves or falling again. There is no rush when it comes to safety!
12. Finally, it is important to notify their doctor that they've had a fall and keep an eye out for emerging pain and signs of injury.

It is important to remember when providing care for a loved one to be aware of your own safety as well as theirs. If you've been on an airplane, you've heard the saying "Place the oxygen mask on yourself, BEFORE helping another person." The same adage applies to providing care – you must care for yourself, BEFORE you can care for others. Your health and safety are also a priority! ■

### References

- 1 Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence. "Giving Care: An Approach to a Better Caregiving Landscape in Canada." November 7, 2022
- 2 Public Health Agency of Canada. Falls Among Older Adults in Canada. November 2025