

When the Caregiver Becomes the Patient

THURSDAY, Nov. 20 (HealthDay News) -- The [stress](#) of providing care for a loved one with Alzheimer's results in 25% of family caregivers having at least one emergency room or hospital visit every six months, says an Indiana University study.

It's long been recognized that family care of an Alzheimer's patient is difficult, but the Indiana University researchers said their study is the first to actually measure the stress and examine how it affects the physical and [mental health](#) of caregivers.

The study included 153 Alzheimer's patients and their family caregivers, for a total of 366 people. Forty-four percent of the caregivers were spouses, and 70% lived with their Alzheimer's-afflicted loved one. The average age of the caregivers was 61 years.

Age, education and relationship to the patient didn't affect caregivers' use of emergency room/hospital services, the researchers found. The behavior and functioning of the patient, not their cognitive disability, were the major factors that determined whether a caregiver went to the emergency room/hospital.

The study was published in the November issue of the *Journal of General Internal Medicine*.

"Our findings opened our minds to the fact that society needs to expand the definition of patient to include both the person with Alzheimer's [dementia](#) and that individual's family caregiver," study corresponding author Dr. Malaz Boustani, an assistant professor of medicine, said in an Indiana University new release.

"For American society to respond to the growing epidemic of [Alzheimer's disease](#), the health care system needs to re-think the definition of patient. These findings alert health-care delivery planners that they need to restructure the health care system to accommodate our new inclusive definition of patient," said Boustani, who directs the Healthy Aging Brain Center.

About four million older adults in the United States have Alzheimer's disease, and three million of them live in the community, often under the care of family members. By 2050, it's estimated there will be 18.5 million people with Alzheimer's in the U.S.

"While we've long known that Alzheimer's is a devastating disease to the patient, this study offers a look at how it also impacts the caregiver's health. If we don't offer help and support to the caregiver too, the stress of caring for someone with dementia can be overwhelming, both mentally and physically," Dr. Cathy C. Schubert, an assistant professor of clinical medicine in the IU School of Medicine, said in the news release.

-- Robert Preidt

SOURCE: Indiana University, news release, Nov. 10, 2008