



Sleep ... the gift that keeps on giving

You likely recall this portion of the famous poem: *"Twas the night before Christmas"*:

"...The children were nestled all snug in their beds;

While visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads;

And mamma in her 'kerchief, and I in my cap,

Had just settled our brains for a long winter's nap,..."

Alzheimer's caregivers, take note! It's no coincidence that the author, Clement Clark Moore, described sleeping as a way to "settle our brains."

Much has been written about the importance of sleep to stay healthy. Recent research makes it powerfully clear how important sleep is to an Alzheimer's caregiver's ability to cope with the stress of caring for a loved one. Poor sleep or not getting enough sleep can cause serious problems for caregivers such as irritability, less patience and difficulty to think clearly. Some experts also say there could be a link between a lack of sleep and developing Alzheimer's, suggesting that people can reduce their risk of the disease by getting enough rest.

By some estimates, caregivers lose 2.5 to 3.5 hours of sleep each week on average because they have trouble falling and staying asleep, often because they worry that their loved one might suffer a fall or try to leave the house during the night.

How does quality sleep help keep you healthy? Some studies indicate that brain waves during sleep trigger a sort of cleansing system that literally washes toxic substances out of our brains. When combined with a healthy diet, exercise and controlled blood pressure, adequate sleep is a key factor in helping caregivers stay healthy enough to focus on their loved one and provide the care he or she needs.

If you're a caregiver, do what you can to not be sleep-deprived. Most people realize sleep is beneficial, but caregivers might not realize it's absolutely essential to deal with issues that crop up each day for a person with Alzheimer's. The effect of being exhausted -- of not getting enough sleep -- is that it robs you of the ability to experience moments of joy with your loved one.

If you have trouble falling and staying asleep, talk with your doctor to be sure you don't have a medical condition that requires treatment.

Following are tips for a better night's sleep from the National Sleep Foundation:

- Carve out at least 30 minutes of wind-down time before bed to do something relaxing, such as read a book. Dim the lights in the house slightly for an hour or so before going to bed.
- Don't keep electronic devices such as laptops, phones and tablets nearby, as light from their screens can make it harder to fall asleep.
- Do a breathing or relaxation exercise to calm your mind.