

State of Caring 2023

The impact of caring on: physical activity

April 2024



About this research

Carers UK carried out an online survey between June and August 2023. A total of 11,667 carers and former carers responded to the survey.

This report summarises the responses from the 10,751 people who are currently providing care.

As not all respondents completed every question in the survey, a number of the figures given in this report are based upon responses from fewer than 10,751 people.

Of respondents to the survey:

- 61% were in England, 17% in Scotland, 12% in Wales and 10% in Northern Ireland
- 39% of carers were in receipt of Carer's Allowance
- 80% were female, 19% were male
- 1% had a different gender identity than their sex registered at birth
- 29% had a disability
- 89% of respondents were White: English/Scottish/Northern Irish/British. 4% were White Irish and 3% were from another White background. 1% were from a mixed or multiple ethnic background. 2% were from an Asian/Asian British background (Indian, Pakistani, Chinese, Bangladeshi or other) and 1% were Black/Black British (African, Caribbean or other)
- 5% were lesbian, gay, bisexual or defined their sexual orientation in another way
- 16% had childcare responsibilities for a non-disabled child under 18
- 3% were aged 0-34, 10% were aged 35-44, 22% were aged 45-54, 35% were aged 55-64, 20% were aged 65-74 and 11% were aged 75 and over
- 34% were employees (18% were full time and 16% part time), and 4% were self-employed
- 32% had been caring for over 15 years, 15% had been caring for 10-14 years, 24% had been caring for 5-9 years, 26% had been caring for 1-4 years and 3% for less than a year
- 47% cared for 90 hours a week or more, 15% cared for 50-89 hours, 24% cared for 20-49 hours and 15% cared for 19 hours or less
- 74% cared for one person, 19% cared for two people, 5% cared for three people and 2% cared for four or more people.

Thanks

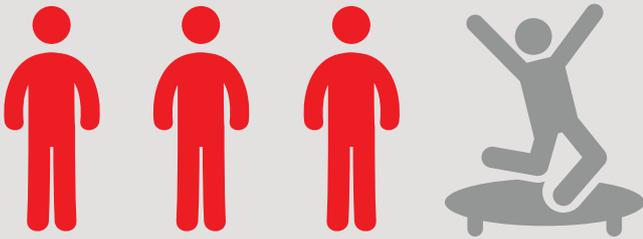
Carers UK would like to thank each and every carer who contributed to this survey, from those who helped us develop and test the survey to every single person who took the trouble and time to tell us about their experiences. Your experiences will be used to help build a society that recognises and supports carers more.

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Introduction

This report explores the background, experiences and attitudes that unpaid carers have in relation to physical activity, while highlighting the connection between activity, health and wellbeing, and loneliness levels of carers. It also covers the topic of breaks and the impact on physical activity.



Three quarters (76%) of carers aged over 55 do not feel that they are able to do as much physical exercise as they'd like to do

(From Carers UK's Carers and Physical Activity report, 2021)¹

It has been produced as part of the Carers Active campaign. Carers Active is a Sport England and National Lottery funded project delivered by Carers UK, aimed at supporting unpaid carers to be more physically active and improve their mental and physical health and wellbeing as a result. We deliver the campaign through a combination of:

- carer-facing work, including developing information and resources for carers, dedicated social media channels, monthly online exercise sessions, and the Carers Active April campaign.
- influencing work across the wider system, including targeted work with national and local organisations that can influence practice and facilitate access to physical activity opportunities for unpaid carers as well as sharing evidence and best practice.

Through the campaign delivery and insight work, we have found that the importance of physical activity to carers' physical and mental health is significant.

Phase one of the Carers Active project (2019-2021) involved research and a pilot with a cohort of unpaid carers, looking specifically at the potential benefits of physical activity. The Carers and Physical Activity report (2021) found that:

- 73% of carers said being physically active makes them feel good about themselves
- 67% of carers said doing a range of physical activities helped them to feel more connected to other people
- 58% of carers said being active helped them to learn more about the importance of looking after their health.

Subsequent insight² has highlighted the impact of the Carers Active campaign to help increase physical activity levels among unpaid carers. The outcomes from this for carers has been decreased loneliness, increased life satisfaction and happiness, and decreased anxiety and stress. This is particularly notable across two groups: carers who are housebound and access online activities, and carers who build relationships at in-person activities.

¹ Carers UK Carers and Physical Activity report 2021 <https://www.carersuk.org/reports/carers-and-physical-activity-a-study-of-the-barriers-motivations-and-experiences-of-unpaid-carers-aged-55-and-over-in-england/>

² Carers Active Year Two Evaluation Report <https://www.carersuk.org/media/r15l2iot/carers-active-year-2-full-report.pdf>

Impact of caring on health

In the UK, around two thirds (65%) of adults will provide care for someone in their adult life³.

Yet caring can come with high personal costs. Many carers find that their friendships and relationships are impacted, with less time to spend with family and friends. This can lead to loneliness and isolation, with carers feeling unsupported and undervalued. Carers are also often providing many different types of care, from clinical tasks to dealing with medication, and providing practical and emotional support. Juggling many different aspects of care, alongside other priorities such as paid employment or childcare, can be stressful, particularly if carers are not receiving the support they need.

Many carers have their own health conditions and some feel that the demands of caring mean they are unable to prioritise their own health and wellbeing, by taking breaks or doing the things they enjoy. Concerningly, the huge pressures placed across the NHS, resulting in delays in obtaining both primary and secondary health care appointments, together with the record levels of demand for social care services, means many carers are not getting the support they need.

A survey of carers undertaken through GP practices in 2023⁴ found that:

- Carers are more likely to have a long-term physical or mental health condition, disability or illness, when compared to non-carers, and are more likely to say that these conditions or illnesses affect their ability to carry out daily activities
- Carers are more likely to have problems with their physical mobility
- Carers are less likely to make a GP appointment for their own health needs.

Despite being at a higher risk of having a physical or mental health condition, a significant proportion of carers say that they are not seeking support with their health conditions due to the demands of their caring role, and over a third (36%) feel unable to take a break from caring to do the things that might improve their wellbeing⁵. This year, we found that carers were struggling even more with their physical and mental health:

- 82% of carers said the impact of caring on their physical and mental health would be a challenge over the coming year – an increase from 77% last year.
- More than a quarter (27%) of unpaid carers have said that their mental health is bad or very bad, rising to 31% of those caring for more than 50 hours a week, or for over 10 years.
- 61% of carers said they needed more support to be able to look after their health and wellbeing.⁶

Many carers are feeling stressed, depressed and lonely. Carers with poor mental health are continuing to care despite being at breaking point. Many carers are uncertain about the future, and anxious about the demands of their caring role, particularly if they are facing challenges such as carrying out clinical tasks, supporting the person they care for when they are discharged from hospital or managing caring alongside their own health conditions. This evidence from carers suggests that their health and wellbeing is being damaged as a result of caring - some of which is preventable with the right interventions, information, advice and support from the NHS, social care and the wider voluntary sector.

³ Carers UK Will I Care Report, 2019 <https://www.carersuk.org/media/warllcph/carersrightsdaynov19final-2.pdf>

⁴ Carers UK GP Patient Survey report <https://www.carersuk.org/media/shbb4c0s/carers-uk-gp-patient-survey-report-2021-web.pdf>

⁵ State of Caring 2023 The impact of caring on: health https://www.carersuk.org/media/xgwlj0gn/soc23-health-report_web.pdf

⁶ State of Caring 2023 The impact of caring on: health https://www.carersuk.org/media/xgwlj0gn/soc23-health-report_web.pdf

Physical activity

Key findings

- **Over two thirds of carers (69%) of carers said they had not undertaken any vigorous activity in the last week, and over a third 35% had not undertaken any moderate activity.**
- **Carers with poor physical and mental health are less likely to be active. Just over half (51%) of carers who said they had bad or very bad physical health had done no moderate physical activity in the last week.**
- **Half of carers (51%) said they had been less active in the last six months and only 14% had increased their physical activity levels. Carers who were struggling to make ends meet were more likely to say they had been less active over the last six months (50%).**
- **63% of respondents said that their caring role reduces the amount of exercise that they're able to do.**
- **Only 16% carers said that they use community sport and leisure facilities sometimes or often. The main barrier to using facilities was carers feeling that they did not have the time (59%).⁷**

The Chief Medical Officer recommends that each week adults take part in at least 150 minutes (or 2.5 hours) of moderate intensity activity (an activity that raises the heart rate, makes breathing faster and a person feel warmer, such as a brisk walk, dancing, a light cycle, or climbing upstairs), or 75 minutes of vigorous intensity activity (an activity that takes hard physical effort and makes you breathe much harder than normal, such as heavy lifting, running, gym work, fast cycling or aerobics).

The following table from the State of Caring survey 2023 data shows carers' physical activity levels compared to the rest of the population using Sport England's Active Lives survey:

⁷ State of Caring 2022 report https://www.carersuk.org/media/ew5e4swg/cuk_state_of_caring_2022_report.pdf

Table 1: Carers' physical activity compared to the national population

	Active Lives survey: % of general population	State of Caring 2023: % of unpaid carers	Difference in levels of physical activity: unpaid carers vs general population	State of Caring 2022: % of unpaid carers	Change in levels of physical activity: 2022-2023
Inactive	26%	48%	+ 22%	51%	- 3%
Fairly active	11%	20%	+ 9%	19%	+ 1%
Active	63%	32%	- 31%	2%	+ 2%

Sport England classify inactive people as those that do less than 30 minutes of physical activity per week. As can be seen in the table, carers are more likely to be inactive than the general population. It's relevant to note that the demographics of unpaid carers responding to the State of Caring survey is different to Sport England's Active Lives survey; unpaid carers tend to be an older cohort. However, that said, there are still stark differences in the physical activity levels.

We can see low levels of moderate or intense physical activity result in an overall picture of inactivity across carers. For instance, 68% of carers report doing zero minutes of vigorous activity and 34% zero minutes of moderate activity over the past seven days. Only 28% of carers take part in moderate intensity activity on three or more days a week. In relation to light exercise, the amount of activity does increase, with 34% of carers saying that they did light exercise each day of the last seven days.

Even though it is relatively small, we can see an upward trend in physical activity levels between 2022 and 2023 and this is backed up by the outcomes of the Carers Active campaign, which has seen carers be more active and have greater opportunity and access to physical activity. Furthermore, over half of carers (58%) said taking part in hobbies and a similar number of carers (57%) said being physically active improves their wellbeing.

Being active is also a particular challenge for carers that are struggling to make ends meet.

“Would like to go swimming regularly but finances won't allow.”

“Being offered the opportunity to make use of the LA swim pool, gyms, etc for a reduced or free would be beneficial as due to being an unpaid carer finances are difficult so often carers can't afford to look after their health.”

For those that say they are often or always lonely, their physical activity levels are lowest, with 72% doing no vigorous and 43% doing no moderate activity per week. By contrast, for those that are hardly ever or never lonely, a smaller figure of 64% had done no vigorous activity and only a quarter (25%) had not done any moderate activity. Overall activity levels of those that aren't lonely are higher with 40% undertaking moderate physical activity on three or more days over the past seven days compared to 34% among lonely carers. And again, for those that aren't lonely, 76% did light activity on three or more days, which reduces to 59% for lonely carers.

“I can no longer exercise, or even get out for a walk. I feel so alone. I don't know who I am anymore.”

A lack of time is a recurring barrier to being active that many carers feedback and the survey reinforced this again.

“I'm in a walking group but can't always take the time out to join them.”

“I miss being able to go out on my bicycle for long rides. We live in a beautiful place yet I can not explore it as I need to be home or at work or travelling between the two.”

“I would like to be able to improve my fitness with regular activity- but the demands of caring, and the time limitations make this impossible.”

“I used to swim a mile most mornings. Now I’m popping in to see Dad each morning, so it doesn’t fit in.”

When looking at the last six months we can see that the majority of carers (51%) have been less active, and only 14% had increased their levels of physical activity, which highlights that there are very much still challenges for carers in building physical activity into daily life. Moreover, carers who rated their mental health as very bad or bad had been even more inactive over the period with 61% being less active and only 11% more active. It could be fair to suggest that carers with bad mental health tend to be more susceptible to barriers such as lacking energy, motivation and confidence that prevents them from being active whether online or in person.

“Unfortunately, your own health and wellbeing are put on the back burner as all your time and effort is being used to care for someone. And if you do get the time to do something for yourself then you’re overcome with feelings of guilt.”

The issue of inactivity among carers can be linked to carers’ health, in that 63% of respondents said their caring role reduces the amount of exercise that they’re able to do. What we can see though, is that over half of carers (57%) understand the importance of being physically active and feel that if they could move more, it would improve their health and wellbeing. Furthermore, over half of carers (58%) feel that they have the ability to be physically active (the physical ability and confidence) and 60% find physical activity enjoyable and satisfying when they can build it into their lives. Again, this backs up previous feedback that carers wish to be more active but still face barriers to being able to do so.

“I would like to see activity groups or gym sessions which can be attended with my son or where my son can be looked after.”

“Carers Active April kick started me being more active, but it’s hard to find the time.”

In terms of opportunities to be active, almost half of carers disagree that they have the opportunity to be active, for example, having the time, somebody to be active with, being able to afford the costs, and having the equipment/kit.

Furthermore, a significant issue that arose from the responses was that carers very often find it hard to leave the person they care for a myriad of reasons, whether it is due to the need to provide complex care, not having the time to access an online session or go out, feeling worried, simply not wishing to leave their loved one, or feeling guilty leaving them and doing something for their own wellbeing. The following comments highlight this:

“I would like to be able to go out walking or swimming more but can’t leave my husband for very long.”

“I’d like to exercise more but I feel guilty if I’m at work all day then go to the gym in the evening as that means more time for the person I care for being left alone. Every moment I am not at work is spent looking after someone else.”

“I would like to go back to Aqua Aerobics but I am worried about leaving my Husband on his own in the daytime although he does have a Helpline. He is prone to falls.”

“I don’t feel I can leave Mum unattended, so I have very little scope to pursue my health and wellbeing. I would like to walk more, do Pilates, swimming, etc., but it’s very difficult to see how I can do this.”

“I love swimming and running but I can’t do these when I’m caring for my son as he wouldn’t be safe to be left. We go swimming together but I cant swim lengths when I’m with him.”

“I would love to go for longer runs/walks without worrying about how long I have been gone.”

This reinforces the common barriers that have been raised by carers in other research and why it’s so important that the Carers Active campaign continues to try and address inactivity as much as possible.

Loneliness and physical activity

Table 2: How often carers said they feel lonely

Often/always	31%
Sometimes	48%
Hardly ever	12%
Never	7%
Prefer not to say	2%

Loneliness is a significant health and wellbeing issue. The survey supports this in the fact that almost a third of carers say that they often feel lonely, a slight increase on the 29% in 2022, and again nearly half (48%) say they sometimes feel lonely. Only 12% state they hardly ever feel lonely. The number increases in relation to those that have cared for more than 15 years with 36% of carers saying they often or always feel lonely and only 10% saying they hardly ever feel lonely. By comparison this is higher than those that have cared for less than 5 years, with 25% being lonely always/often and 15% hardly ever.

There is a link between loneliness and physical activity. Previous research has told us that only 1 in 10 (10%) lonely carers said that they are happy with how active they are⁸. It also showed that there is a pattern of decreased loneliness for active carers although loneliness levels are higher for carers (regardless of activity level) compared with the general population.

⁸ Carers UK Carers and Physical Activity report 2021 <https://www.carersuk.org/reports/carers-and-physical-activity-a-study-of-the-barriers-motivations-and-experiences-of-unpaid-carers-aged-55-and-over-in-england/>

Breaks

With many carers feeling exhausted by caring and it detrimentally affecting their physical and mental health, it's concerning that over a third of carers haven't tried to take a break because they think it's too difficult. This increases worryingly to over half (52%) among carers rating their mental health as very bad or bad. Almost a third of carers have relied on family or friends to provide replacement care and only 10% received replacement care from a local health or social care service, illustrating a system that puts further strain on, and not enough respite for, carers to be physically active.

For people that are often or always lonely they face even more strain and isolation as over half haven't felt able to take a break because it's too difficult, further adding to their feeling of isolation and loneliness. We see similar figures among carers who are struggling to make ends meet with 51% not feeling able to take a break, likely due to the high costs and unaffordability of replacement care.

Of course, not being able to take a break leads to carers feeling extremely tired and therefore not having the energy in some cases to think about being active, let alone being active. What is particularly pertinent is that many carers who report feeling too tired, do also appreciate the benefits of being active and would like to move more but feel they can't:

“I have less time for physical activity and can get stressed, though this comes and goes depending on what's going on at the time. I never seem to stop, though and am aware this is not generally good for my health.”

“I like playing table tennis, but get too tired to want to go.”

“I miss being able to take time to walk and exercise because I just don't have the energy anymore. I miss doing hobbies but I'm too tired or lack enthusiasm.”

“Would like to go swimming or to a gym every week, but with sleepless nights, I just don't have enough energy.”

“I no longer can go out long walks, go to the gym or go swimming, I am always exhausted, I am up numerous times during the night with my mum then have to get up and go to work, I have taken time of work due to exhaustion and stress.”

“I try to attend yoga and tai chi three times a week for my own sanity and to try and remain agile and fit to care for two loved ones 25 miles apart with serious health issues and extreme care needs. Some weeks I am too exhausted to attend the classes.”

Recommendations

In order to ensure that carers are able to take part in physical activity, and are supported to look after their own health and wellbeing, Carers UK recommends that:

- **UK Governments should ensure that addressing the profound health inequality between carers and non-carers and enabling unpaid carers to live healthy lives is part of the national and local health prevention agenda. Carers should be considered when devising strategies for public health, including social prescribing policy.**
- **Government should also invest in carers' breaks so that carers are able to access the breaks they need and improve their mental and physical health and wellbeing.**
- **Support services and local voluntary organisations should signpost carers to different physical activities that range from light to high intensity, and that can be done in shorter chunks of time, to engage carers of all abilities and time constraints. Carers should be able to access both in person and online physical activities.**
- **Physical activity service providers such as sports clubs, leisure centres, gyms and community facilities should be more carer-friendly, for instance by offering subsidised or free activities for unpaid carers and flexibility around times and having a social element. Making both in person and online activity sessions free or subsidised can help offset the financial barrier to unpaid carers being active, which will almost certainly increase with the growing cost of living crisis.**
- **Local carers' organisations should provide a range of classes and activities focussing on physical activity, including digital and at home provision for those who cannot leave home due to their caring responsibilities. They should also include ability to take part in physical activity in carer's assessments as part of the Care Act 2014 welfare principle, where commissioned to run assessments.**

CarersActive

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This is the fourth of a series of reports based on data from State of Caring 2023



Across the UK today 5.7 million people are carers – supporting a loved one who is older, disabled or seriously ill.

Carers UK is here to listen, to give carers expert information and tailored advice. We champion the rights of carers and support them in finding new ways to manage at home, at work, or in their community.

We're here to make life better for carers.

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