

# Policy Briefing: Physical activity and unpaid carers in Wales

## Purpose of the briefing

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The purpose of this briefing is to give an overview of:

- The importance of physical activity for unpaid carers
- Barriers unpaid carers face in undertaking physical activity
- Help available for unpaid carers to be physically active

## Introduction

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The 2021 census indicates that there are 310,000<sup>1</sup> people in Wales who provide care on an unpaid basis to family or friends who need care and support due to age, illness, disability or because of a mental health condition. Unpaid carers may perform any number of tasks, from personal care such as washing and toileting through to administering medication and accompanying the people they look after to medical appointments. Unpaid carers are estimated to save the NHS and other services in Wales billions of pounds<sup>2</sup> every year by providing care that the state would otherwise have to provide.

However, unpaid carers often report multiple physical health problems, including fatigue and musculoskeletal disorders, while among those who provide hands-on care (such as lifting the person they care for) higher levels of arthritis and long-term back problems are common. Indeed, a study conducted by Public Health Wales in 2021<sup>3</sup> found that unpaid carers are more likely to be living with multiple long-term health conditions from a younger age and experience poorer general health than non-carers. The study concluded that carers experience significantly higher rates of 36 out of 37 long-term health conditions compared to people without caring responsibilities.

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<sup>1</sup> ONS (2023): [Unpaid care by age, sex and deprivation, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

<sup>2</sup> Welsh Government (2018): [Minister confirms £15m investment to support carers and adults with care needs](#)

<sup>3</sup> Public Health Wales (2021): [Unpaid carers in Wales: The creation of an e-cohort to understand long-term health conditions amongst unpaid carers in Wales](#)

It has long been recognised that carers often struggle to balance meeting their caring responsibilities while maintaining their own physical and mental health, a point reiterated in a report by Cardiff University in 2021<sup>4</sup>. In the Carers Wales State of Caring 2022 survey<sup>5</sup>, a quarter (24%) of carers reported that their physical health was bad or very bad, and over a third (34%) said their mental health was bad or very bad. It is evident that carers face acute health problems arising from their caring role.

## Why physical activity matters

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Being physically active brings clear health benefits. It improves sleep, supports the maintenance of a healthy weight, manages stress levels, and helps mental wellbeing<sup>6</sup>. The UK Chief Medical Officer recommends that each week adults undertake at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity or 75 minutes of vigorous-intensity activity.

Unfortunately, evidence strongly suggests that carers are less physically active than the wider population. A study of carers in England over the age of 55<sup>7</sup> found that 46% of carers aged 55 and over were physically inactive, significantly higher than the 33% of the non-carer population who were inactive. The Carers Wales State of Caring 2022 survey<sup>8</sup>, responded to by over 1,000 carers in Wales of all ages, found that 68% of carers had not undertaken any vigorous physical activity in the previous week while 40% had not done any moderate activity. Concerningly, this situation may be worsening with nearly half of carers in Wales (47%) reporting that they had been less active in the previous 6 months while just 13% said they had been more active over the same period.

## Barriers to physical activity for carers

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<sup>4</sup> Cardiff University (2021): [Voices of Carers during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Messages for the future of unpaid caring in Wales](#)

<sup>5</sup> Carers Wales (2022): [State of Caring in Wales 2022 A snapshot of unpaid care in Wales](#)

<sup>6</sup> Carers UK (2020): [Carers and Physical Activity Briefing for professionals](#)

<sup>7</sup> Carers UK (2021): [Carers and Physical Activity A study of the barriers, motivations and experiences of unpaid carers aged 55 and over in England](#)

<sup>8</sup> Carers Wales (2022): [State of Caring in Wales 2022 A snapshot of unpaid care in Wales](#)

Unpaid carers want to be more physically active, but they struggle to do so. Three quarters (76%) of carers say they are not able to do as much exercise as they would wish to with a similar proportion (73%) saying that being physically active makes them feel good about themselves. Carers who are active are less likely to be lonely (at 22%), compared to inactive carers (37%)<sup>9</sup>. However, there is much to suggest that carers face significant barriers to participating in physical activity.

A majority of carers (72%) in Wales say they don't have the time or energy to be more active, and 71% say they are unable to use leisure facilities such as swimming pools or gyms due to a lack of time to focus on their own health<sup>10</sup>. This barrier reflects the exhaustion many carers experience due to the demanding nature of their responsibilities, and the difficulty many face in finding any time off from their unpaid caring role. Indeed, 42% of carers in Wales in 2022<sup>11</sup> said they had been unable to take a break from caring in the previous year. Even when carers are able to take a break from caring, they may use the time to catch up on sleep or other aspects of life they may have de-prioritised while focusing on caring for their loved one.

It is therefore unsurprising that carers with the highest-intensity caring responsibilities are also the least active. People providing care for over 50 hours a week had higher levels of inactivity than those caring for less than 50 hours across both rigorous (69% to 60%) and moderate activity (39% to 31%)<sup>12</sup>. The 2021 census suggests this relationship between high intensity caring and low activity levels may be particularly relevant in Wales. The census suggests 107,000 people in Wales provide unpaid care for more than 50 hours a week. This was the most common category of hours of care and a higher percentage of the overall population in Wales (3.6%) than in England (2.7%)<sup>13</sup>.

Financial pressures, exacerbated by the present cost of living crisis, represent an additional barrier to physical activity among carers, with many feeling they cannot afford to take up and maintain opportunities to be active. In the State of Caring survey<sup>14</sup>, 44% of Welsh carers said they had cut back on hobbies because of the cost-of-living crisis. For many, these hobbies would have been important opportunities to get out of the house and be active. Amongst carers who said they were struggling to

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<sup>9</sup> Carers UK (2021): [Carers and Physical Activity A study of the barriers, motivations and experiences of unpaid carers aged 55 and over in England](#)

<sup>10</sup> Carers Wales (2022): [State of Caring in Wales 2022 A snapshot of unpaid care in Wales](#)

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> ONS (2023): [Unpaid care, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

<sup>14</sup> Carers Wales (2022): [State of Caring in Wales 2022 A snapshot of unpaid care in Wales](#)

make ends meet, 62% said they had been less active in the previous 6 months, compared to 47% of carers who were not struggling financially. Many carers also feel that local exercise and leisure facilities are too expensive for them to use, with 45% saying this was a barrier to using them. Research has previously suggested that carers face additional costs because of their caring role that are not experienced by most people, such as through higher energy and food bills to manage certain conditions and higher travel costs through attending frequent appointments<sup>15</sup>. Many carers also struggle to maintain employment alongside caring. The census suggests 11.5% of the Welsh population in the most deprived areas provide care, compared to 9.7% in the least deprived areas<sup>16</sup>. With the proportion caring for over 50 hours a week significantly higher in more deprived areas as well, there is much to suggest that financial barriers are more likely to make carers inactive.

There is clear evidence that carers are in worse health than the wider population. With bad physical health making physical activity more difficult, it is perhaps unsurprising that carers in bad health face additional barriers to being active compared to carers in better health. In 2022, half (51%) of carers in bad or very bad physical health reported that they had done no physical activity in the previous week, compared to just 29% of carers in good or very good health<sup>17</sup>. Physical activity helps make carers healthier, but health inequalities need to be addressed to support carers to become more active.

## Help for carers to be more physically active

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Leisure facilities, such as gyms, swimming pools, leisure centres and sports halls provide a range of activities and ways to be physically active. Across Wales, many local authorities offer discounted or free membership of, or access to, these facilities to help unpaid carers to be physically active. Carers with a Carers Recognition Card are entitled to a free 6-month membership to Pembrokeshire leisure facilities which offer fitness classes, health checks and swimming classes. In Monmouthshire, carers can apply for a 25% discount at council leisure centres. Carers in Powys and Ceredigion can access a discount for leisure services with an iCare card and Halo leisure in

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<sup>15</sup> Carers Wales (2022): [New policy briefing explains unpaid carers are particularly vulnerable to financial and health impacts of cost-of-living crisis](#)

<sup>16</sup> ONS (2023): [Unpaid care by age, sex and deprivation, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

<sup>17</sup> Carers Wales (2022): [State of Caring in Wales 2022 A snapshot of unpaid care in Wales](#)

Bridgend offer discounted membership to carers in receipt of Carers Allowance or the carer element of Universal Credit. At their Bridgend Life Centre, they deliver guided exercise sessions for carers in the Halo Toning Suite along with nutrition and diet advice. Fully funded 1-year memberships of Newport Live, which provides various leisure facilities including gyms and swimming pools, are being offered by Newport Council to carers in receipt of the Welsh Government's Carer Support Fund.

In many parts of Wales, carers are also able to access various physical activity sessions for carers organised by the local authority or partner organisations. Bridgend Carers Centre offers monthly walks, weekly Zumba and yoga classes for carers. In Ynys Mon, carers can attend all Dementia Active exercise sessions and some sessions are specifically for carers. Monmouthshire Council has organised outdoor activities for carers including guided walks, while similar social walks for carers are organised by Newport Council during Carers Week. Young carers in Newport are also able to access activities such as football through Barnardo's. In Pembrokeshire, activities for people with dementia and their carers include 'Walk and Talk' sessions and free fitness sessions for carers with Strength Academy Wales, a local fitness charity.

Advice on how to be more active helps to reduce some of the barriers carers face. To help to meet this need, Carers UK has established a Carers Active project<sup>18</sup> which provides advice and information on getting more active, including activity ideas to integrate more activity into carer's schedules, advice from experts in the health and fitness sectors and information on physical activity such as the types of activities which strengthen muscles and bones. Carers Active April<sup>19</sup> is a campaign month by Carers UK to support carers to be more active. It provides helpful tips, online sessions and challenges to increase physical activity among carers. Carers Wales offers online 'Me Time' sessions<sup>20</sup> for carers in Wales to socialise with other carers. Activities offered through 'Me Time' range from mindfulness and information talks through to online physical activity sessions including Zumba and Dru Yoga.

## Conclusion

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Physical activity is important for good health, yet it is clear unpaid carers are at a health disadvantage compared to those who are not caring. They are less likely to be

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<sup>18</sup> Carers UK: [Carers Active Hub](#)

<sup>19</sup> Carers UK: [Carers Active April](#)

<sup>20</sup> Carers Wales: [Online Support Sessions](#)

physically active and face significant additional barriers that arise from their caring role. With carers being in worse health than the overall population, there is a clear imperative to support carers to be more active so they can benefit from the positive health effects of physical activity.

Activities, discounts, and programmes are being offered across Wales to help carers to be more active. Amidst a cost-of-living crisis and the documented financial barrier to participation in activities, it is welcome that free or subsidised activities are being offered, though the high proportion of carers who continue to feel their finances limit their ability to engage suggests more needs to be done to make leisure facilities and activities affordable for carers.

In their study that found carers face a health penalty from providing care to their family or friends, Public Health Wales<sup>21</sup> emphasised that local authorities and healthcare providers should provide a range of flexible services to support the prevention of poor health among carers. With a lack of time and breaks being a leading barrier to carers participating in physical activity, breaks and respite services for carers have an important role to play in giving carers the time and energy to be more active. The Welsh Government has provided funding for a national short breaks scheme for carers between 2023 and 2025<sup>22</sup> and many carers will be hoping that it gives them much-needed time off to participate in physical activity. Ongoing pressures in the social care system, including workforce challenges, mean that many carers are having to provide substantial hours of care every week with little support. Progress in tackling these issues would also facilitate physical activity among carers by reducing the intensity of their caring responsibilities and providing breathing space.

Across Wales, hundreds of thousands of unpaid carers are playing a vital role in the health and social care system, providing care that saves Wales billions of pounds every year. Physical activity reinforces the health of unpaid carers, helping them to continue to provide the care society relies on them to undertake. Through action to support carers to be more active, Wales can fortify its unpaid carers and the care system and people who need them.

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<sup>21</sup> Public Health Wales (2021): [Unpaid carers in Wales: The creation of an e-cohort to understand long-term health conditions amongst unpaid carers in Wales](#)

<sup>22</sup> Welsh Government (2022): [Written Statement: Short Breaks Scheme for Unpaid Carers](#)

## For more information

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