

# Alberta Doctors' Digest

## Supporting seniors and their caregivers

Care for seniors is a hot topic in health care. A large number of Albertans are either seniors or they are caring for one, but supports for both populations are complicated to access.

The AMA's March 2022 survey *Caregiving & Seniors' Supports in Alberta* shows the following:

- Only 3% of survey participants are seniors who receive care from a family member or friend.
- Almost one in five (17%) participate in the care of an aging family member or friend.
- Fully 78% do not provide or receive care. However, among this group nearly two-thirds (64%) say they are likely to be a caregiver at some point.

### **More than health services: What's involved in caregiving and senior supports**

Let's look at the 3%\* who receive care from a friend or family member.

When they were asked what additional resources are needed to support Albertans in their community to age in place, they ranked all the following items above medical care:

- Assistance with shopping, errands.
- Funding for home renovations (ramps, grab bars).
- Accessible transportation for non-drivers.
- Rehabilitation (physio, occupational therapy).
- Home care (assistance with personal care, meds).
- Assistance with home maintenance, snow, grass.

All this makes sense because 91% of the respondents were able to access needed medical care all or most of the time.

In addition, 29% of those saying they receive caregiving reported they are housebound, and the vast majority do not receive home medical care.

Dr. Jasneet Parmar, a care of the elderly physician with the Edmonton Zone Specialized Geriatrics Program, as well as a professor with the U of A Department of Family Medicine, notes that our community supports – mainly social supports – are gradually increasing over time.

“We have seen an increase in supports for both seniors and their caregivers, but navigating the social and health systems of care is challenging,” says Dr. Parmar. “You must know where to go for each service you need and contact each individually. This is in addition to navigating the health system for needed medical services.”

What's needed is a way to coordinate the social system and health system to reduce the navigation challenges.

## **Supports to age in place**

Despite the small sample size, the results reflect what Dr. Marjan Abassi sees in her everyday work. Dr. Abassi is an associate clinical professor with the U of A Department of Family Medicine and the site lead for the Misericordia Hospital's geriatric program. She has a particular interest in addressing frailty in seniors and is an advocate for bringing care to the patient's home – before they become frail.

“Frailty isn't just a physical issue; it can be social or cognitive in nature,” explains Dr. Abassi. “Preventing frailty is about more than medical management, and that's why we need to look at the social determinants of health.”

Does a person who is prescribed a special diet have food security? Can they afford their medications? Do they have transportation to get to their appointments? Do they have a caregiver or other supports? Those who have such supports are more successful in warding off frailty and can live independently in their community. Those who don't often end up with lengthy stays in hospital.

## **Increasing pressure for caregivers**

How critical is the role caregivers play in seniors' care? Very!

Sharon Anderson has a PhD in aging and family gerontology. She notes that caregivers contribute \$97.1 billion to the Canadian economy in free work, and they provide 90% of care in the community. They are essential.

Yet caregivers are a group that is often overlooked in our current system, according to Dr. Parmar. Their advocacy for care can set up a vicious cycle. They may be perceived as challenging and not given proper attention, which may make them more demanding. It's a cycle that may cause providers to avoid or dismiss them.

In addition, caregivers are often under financial strain, balancing out-of-pocket expenses or helping to support the senior. The majority are working but may have to miss work or take a part-time position to fulfill their caregiving duties, which might reduce their income, pensions or both.

“The combination of financial, time and emotional pressure is affecting the health of caregivers,” notes Dr. Anderson. “Families are getting smaller, and people do not have as many children to share the caregiving responsibilities.”

This survey found that of the original 3,326 respondents, 17% participate in the care of an aging family member or friend now, and 64% say they are likely to be a caregiver at some point. The 2018 Statistics Canada General Social Survey indicates 24% of Canadians are family caregivers.

When asked what resources they need to maintain/improve their own mental health, caregivers participating in our March survey most commonly note that “finding time for themselves” is important (61%). These are other commonly cited needs:

- Seeking mental health advice/counselling for themselves.

- Looking after their own physical health.
- Finding opportunities to take a break from their caregiving responsibilities.
- Finding out what to expect in the future as it relates to their caregiving.
- Finding assistance with their own responsibilities at home.
- Seeking help when it comes to financial/legal/work issues.

Physicians can help lighten the burden on caregivers by being mindful of how their care plans will affect both patient and caregiver.

- Can care be provided in the home?
- Can multiple appointments be grouped together to reduce travel time and missed work?
- Are the suggested interventions feasible?
- How can physicians be compensated to more easily treat seniors, inclusive of their caregivers, with complex health needs?

“In the UK, GPs have a billing code for the time they spend supporting a patient’s caregiver,” says Dr. Anderson. “This is just one idea that could have a positive impact on senior patients and the people who care for them.”

## Results of poll on caregiving & seniors’ supports in Alberta

[albertapatients.ca](http://albertapatients.ca) members participate regularly in polls on health care topics that are important to them. When polls are completed, we create a report on what members told us. Caregiving & Seniors’ Supports in Alberta was collected from February 24 to March 8, 2022 (n=3,326).

View the [survey results](#).

## Futures Policy Forum

The Alberta Association on Gerontology is hosting a series of webinars in 2022 as part of their new initiative to transform the future of aging in Alberta. With sponsorship from the AMA, the Futures Policy Forum Initiative asserts Alberta can be a leader in moving forward in new ways – and we all gain when we do the following:

- Increase opportunities for healthy living and aging.
- Provide more services and choices for living in the community.
- Improve connections and strength across services and care partners.
- Enhance quality of resident living and quality of work life in facility-based continuing care.

[Register now](#).

### Editor’s note:

\*Only 3% of those interviewed in March report that they are older and receive care from family members or friends. They were asked follow-up questions related to their personal needs and experiences. Given the small incidence of the sample (n=90), care should be taken in the interpretation of findings from these inquiries because the resulting margin of error is +/- 10.3 percentage points at a 95% confidence interval. As such, these findings should be treated as more directional than generalizable.

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