

Health

Caring for our carers

Carers are everywhere in our community. They play an integral role in our health-care system, providing unpaid care and support to family members and friends with a disability, mental illness, chronic condition, terminal illness or who are frail aged.

According to Carers Australia, there are over 2.7 million carers in Australia, that's 12 per cent of the population, providing daily help with physical and personal care, medications and medical appointments, emotional support, transport and more.

Carers Australia's most recent estimate puts the value of the unpaid care provided by carers at \$60.3 billion annually, or over \$1 billion per week.

You don't have to live in the home of the person you care for to be considered a carer. You don't have to be a relative and you don't have to be caring full time. Friends, neighbours, parents, partners, children, husbands and wives can all be carers.

The role of a carer is emotionally and physically demanding. Castlemaine Health offers a range of services for carers living in the Mount Alexander Shire and encourages people to seek out support and assistance.

Adult day service program supervisor at Castlemaine Health, Leanne Edwards, likens the need for carers to engage with support to the safety demonstration on an aeroplane.

"If oxygen is required on a plane, they ask you to put a mask on yourself before you help anybody else," says Leanne.

"It's the same with caring."

"Your natural instinct may be to put the needs of the person you're caring for first, but you have to look after yourself. It's not selfish. It's actually investing in the longevity of your care relationship."

Sonya Oper, social worker at Castlemaine Health, says that often carers will resist reaching out for support because

they feel they don't deserve it or for fear that it might result in their loved one going into care.

"The aim of both the community rehabilitation centre and the adult day service at Castlemaine Health is to support care arrangements and keep people at home and in the community," she says.

"Care outside the home could well be a discussion we need to have down the track, but from the outset we do whatever we can to keep existing care arrangements sustainable."

"Becoming a carer is usually unexpected," she says.

"It's not a situation people sign up for and the adjustments can be huge."

"People suddenly go from being a partner or child to a carer and it can be very hard to separate those roles."

"Often carers think they have to do everything but that's just not the case."

"For us it's about listening to people and understanding their limitations. Perhaps they want to care for their elderly parent but showering and personal care is a challenge, or they want to be able to maintain aspects of their social or working life. We can support that."

"There are no wrong doors," says Sonya.

"Even if we're not the service to help you, we will find the right one and direct you towards it."

The adult day service runs a range of programs designed to give carers a much-needed break, provide them with opportunities to connect with others in a similar situation and just enjoy life.

The men's respite service takes elderly men who have cognitive issues such as dementia or Parkinsons Disease out for a day's activities. The out & out club organises evenings out and trips away for groups of young people with disabilities. The service is also putting the finishing touches on their



first trip away for a group of adult carers and their partners.

"For many carers life can become a series of appointments and day-to-day physical care," says Leanne.

"But they deserve to have time away from all of that."

"For most, a holiday would just be too hard to manage on their own but with our support they can do something as a couple and be 'normal' again."

Another popular program is the weekly carers exercise class which is open to carers or ex-carers whose partners may have passed or gone into care.

"It's a functional strength training class, but we exercise our jaws a lot too," laughs

Leanne.

"A lot comes out over coffee afterwards and it's a great chance for us to connect people with additional services or just listen."

"Care arrangements change over time. Most often people's health will continue to decline and a carer's role will increase and become harder. We're like one big family. We look out for people. We debrief and we pick up on things that we can help with."

"Clients really look forward to coming along to one of our services; meeting up with their friends, socialising and feeling more like their old selves."

We see people blossom and that's just so rewarding."

Q&A

Q: Do I have to be living with the person I care for to be considered a carer?

A: No, we're actually seeing a lot more neighbours and friends who are carers. Often they won't be identified as a carer until way down the track, because they're 'just a neighbour who pops in', but actually they're keeping things afloat.

Q: Do I have to be an older person to be considered a carer?

A: No, in fact, according to Carers Australia 272,000 of Australia's carers are aged 25 and under. We have supported carers as young as 15 through our service. It's possible to access financial support for living and educational expenses as a young carer so it's well worth linking in with services.



Castlemaine Health adult day service program supervisor Leanne Edwards and Castlemaine Health Social Worker Sonya

If you or someone you know is a carer and you'd like to know more about the support available in our community speak to your GP.

**For general information contact:
Intake Office
Community Rehabilitation Centre (CRC)
Castlemaine Health**

(P) 5471 1575

(F) 5471 1674

(E) intake@castlemainehealth.org.au

**Or the Adult Day Service on 5471 1566 or
ads@castlemainehealth.org.au**

Send us your questions or tips about health and wellbeing

Write to us to have your question or tip featured here.

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