Made with our friends at CareScout®

When You Become a Caregiver Overnight

(The crash course nobody signed up for.)

No one really plans to become a caregiver. Many people are thrown into it overnight — a diagnosis, a fall, or a hospital discharge with a stack of papers and a "good luck."

If that's you, take a breath. You don't have to figure everything out today. This cheat sheet is just to help you get your bearings and focus on the first things that matter.

1. Start by Understanding What's Going On

Before you can plan anything, you need a basic picture of the situation. You don't need to become a medical expert. But knowing the basics helps you make better decisions. Learn the basics about:

- ☐ The illness, condition, or diagnosis
- ☐ What changes it might cause over time
- ☐ Whether special care skills are needed to provide care *(mobility support, wound care, medication management, language needs, etc.)*

Important Note:

If this started with a hospital stay, ask these questions before leaving the hospital:

- ☐ What symptoms should send us back to the ER?
- ☐ What follow-up appointments are needed?
- ☐ What medications changed?
- ☐ Who do we call if something goes wrong?
- ☐ Do we need home health, physical therapy, or nursing visits?

Write the answers down. Because once you get home... you will forget half of it.

2. Make Sure the Home Is Safe Right Now

When someone's health changes, their environment might need to change too. A few small adjustments early can prevent a lot of problems later. Ask yourself (and the clinical team):

What Your Loved One Needs Right Now

- [ ] Are there tripping hazards in the home?
- [ ] Are medications organized correctly?
- [ ] Is cooking still safe?
- [ ] Do they need equipment? (walker, grab bars, hospital bed)

What Your Loved One Might Need in the Future

- [ ] Should they still be driving?
- [ ] Will stairs become an issue?
- [ ] Is wandering a risk?

3. Figure Out What Help Is Needed Day-to-Day

Care needs usually fall into two categories.

ADLs (Activities of Daily Living)

These are the fundamentals of daily care.

- [ ] Eating
- [ ] Dressing and grooming
- [ ] Bathing or showering
- [ ] Getting in and out of bed or chairs
- [ ] Toileting
- [ ] Managing bladder or bowel function (yes... this becomes a normal topic of conversation)

IADLs (Instrumental Activities of Daily Living)

These are the logistics of everyday life.

- [ ] Managing medications
- [ ] Driving or transportation
- [ ] Grocery shopping and meals
- [ ] Managing finances
- [ ] Housekeeping and home maintenance
- [ ] Managing phone/email communication

Once you know the day-to-day needs, look at who can help. That might be family stepping in, hired care if it fits the budget, or a mix of both. Every situation looks different, and even a little backup can lighten the load.

4. Get All the Important Stuff in One Place

When caregiving begins, information gets scattered fast. Start your "care binder" (a binder, notebook, or digital folder) with:

- [ ] Doctors and healthcare providers & contact info
- [ ] Diagnoses and medical history
- [ ] Medication list (names, doses, instructions)
- [ ] Insurance information (health & long-term care if applicable)
- [ ] Pharmacy contact information

You'll reference this constantly, especially during appointments or emergencies.

5. Build Your Caregiving Support Team Early

One of the biggest traps caregivers fall into is trying to handle everything themselves. You don't have to. Even if you're the primary caregiver, you can still build a small care team around you.

Start by identifying a few people who can be part of the circle:

- [ ] Siblings or close family
- [ ] A close friend
- [ ] A trusted neighbor

Then create a simple group text to share updates, coordinate help, ask quick questions, and flag when you need backup.

Things they can help with?

- [ ] Picking up prescriptions
- [ ] Dropping off groceries
- [ ] Running errands
- [ ] Driving to appointments
- [ ] Bringing over a meal
- [ ] Sitting with your loved one to give you a break

6. Handle the Essential Paperwork

Two documents you'll want right away are:

- ☐ **HIPAA release:** Allows doctors to speak with you about medical information
- ☐ **Healthcare proxy (aka medical power of attorney):** Allows someone to make medical decisions if your loved one cannot

→ **And when you've had a chance to catch your breath, add these documents to your to-do list:** financial power of attorney, living will, DNR. Our **Caregiver's Cheat Sheet to Must-Have Paperwork** breaks them all down.

7. Don't Forget About You

Caregivers are notorious for putting themselves last.

Consider this your official permission to:

- ✓ Take breaks when you can
- ✓ Protect your sleep, nutrition, and health
- ✓ Accept help from people who offer it
- ✓ Let go of some non-essential commitments

Important Note: If your employer offers caregiver benefits or an **Employee Assistance Program,** it's worth checking out. And keep doing **at least one thing that brings you joy.**

One Last Thing: Caregiving comes with a million questions but zero instructions. If you're feeling overwhelmed, that's normal. Start with a few things on this list.

You don't have to tackle it all at once.