Stroke Caregivers at Greater Risk for Depression, Anxiety
By Traci Pedersen
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Caregivers of stroke victims are at risk for depression as well as developing complications from chronic stress, according to researchers at the Loyola University.

Up to 80 percent of stroke survivors are cared for by family members who help victims manage their physical and cognitive disabilities. Those can include paralysis, personality changes, urinary incontinence and speech difficulties.

“Stroke survivors can suffer significant and lasting disabilities that may require lifelong support from family and other caregivers,” said Karen Saban, PhD, RN, lead author and associate professor.

“Many families struggle to provide 24-hour care for their loved ones. This burden places the caregivers at risk for depression, anxiety and sleep disturbances, which can harm quality of life and heighten their risk for other health problems.”

Researchers evaluated 45 women who were taking care of a family member who had suffered a stroke within the past year. Study participants were recruited from support groups, social networking sites and two outpatient clinics. The median age of the women was 55.8 years, and they were providing an average 50.7 hours of care per week.

The women answered survey questions regarding perceived stress, caregiver burden, social support, quality of sleep and depressive symptoms. Researchers also collected saliva samples to test for the stress-related hormone cortisol four times throughout the day for two days.

Results showed that the caregivers had high levels of perceived stress, burden and poor quality of sleep. The study also found that the burden of caring for a stroke victim increases the risk of depressive symptoms and stress.

This burden can include financial strain, home confinement, changes in the relationship with the care recipient, noncompliance of the stroke survivor, demands of caring for the stroke victim and having little time for oneself.

Women with strong symptoms of depression also had decreasing levels of cortisol during the day while those with fewer symptoms of depression had higher levels. Researchers suggest that lower cortisol levels may contribute to an increased risk of depression.

“This was one of the first studies to look at the unique needs of women caring for stroke survivors,” Saban said. “Recognizing the challenges of these caregivers may help health-care professionals better support these women.”