Dear Alice,

My partner is always getting colds, sinus infections, and other nasties during cold and flu season. I've seen him through strep throat, stomach flu, and 16 months of sinus infection flare-ups. It's important to me to take care of him when he's ill, and I know he appreciates the help, but during the school year I get nervous about the risk to my own health and the potential for missing classes/work. What are some ways (short of wearing a mask...) to keep myself from catching all of his bugs without leaving him sick, sad, and lonely?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Your partner is lucky to have you to take care of him when he's ill. It's great that you're thinking ahead about caring for yourself, too! Staying healthy as a caregiver involves more than just avoiding your partner's germs - it also means actively practicing self-care and prioritizing your own needs as well.

Maintaining a healthy diet with lots of fruits and veggies, exercising regularly, getting plenty of sleep, getting a flu vaccination and regularly going to your health care provider for checkups are some tried and true ways to keep your immune system healthy. Practicing good hand washing hygiene and making sure to disinfect doorknobs, phones, remote controls, or any other hard surfaces that bacteria and viruses may linger on can also prevent the spread of germs. Some viruses can even be transmitted through airborne droplets, so try to avoid very close contact with your partner while he is coughing and sneezing.

Beyond the possibility of catching your partner's illness, caregivers often report feeling overwhelmed, stressed out, frustrated, and depressed by the challenging task of caring for someone while dealing with their other responsibilities. These feelings can have as concrete an impact on your physical and mental health as germs themselves. To foster your overall well-being, try taking a break from caregiving once in a while. Going out with friends, working out, or doing something for yourself can help you stay positive and lower your stress levels. And if it seems like you don't have time, or have too much to do, don't be afraid to ask for help! A sick partner, school, and work is a lot to manage on your own, and you may have friends and family who are willing to help out but don't know exactly how.
Remember, by keeping yourself healthy and happy, you’ll be able to more effectively care for your partner and keep up with your other obligations.

To your health!

Alice!

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Published date:
Oct 11, 2013
Last reviewed on:
Oct 11, 2013

Source URL: http://www.goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/taking-care-sick-without-getting-sick

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