Sharing Family Responsibilities for Aging Parents

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When Mom or Dad starts needing help, the child who lives closest or the one everyone relies on can end up doing most of the work. A conversation with your parents before a crisis gives the whole family time to work out who can help and how.

Begin with your parents' wishes

Ask Mom and Dad what they would want if living at home became harder. What would they want help with first? Who would they want involved? Include siblings who live out of town by phone or video. The National Institute on Aging recommends talking with the older person and the people involved in their care before an emergency, while everyone has time to discuss what they want and need [1].

Give each person a specific job

Someone nearby might handle rides to appointments or help with groceries. A sibling farther away can arrange home care, coordinate family updates, or help with bills and insurance paperwork with the parents' permission. If relatives want to contribute financially, agree on what they can afford and what it will cover. Someone who can't commit money may still be able to schedule appointments or give the primary caregiver a break during a visit [1–2].

Put the agreement in writing

Write down each task, who owns it, and who can step in when that person is unavailable. Set a date to check in again. Ask the person doing most of the day-to-day care what would make the biggest difference this month. An explicit request such as "Can you handle the home-care calls this week?" gives someone a concrete way to help [3–4].

Talk before resentment builds

Research published in The Gerontologist found an association between providing care after a mother's major health event and tension among siblings [5]. If one person is already carrying too much, start by acknowledging the work they've been doing. Then agree on one responsibility someone else can take over now.

Sources and further reading

[1] National Institute on Aging. Sharing Caregiving Responsibilities

[2] National Institute on Aging. What Is Long-Distance Caregiving?

[3] National Institute on Aging. Coordinating Caregiving Responsibilities Worksheet

[4] Family Caregiver Alliance. Holding a Family Meeting

[5] The Gerontologist. Caregiving, Perceptions of Maternal Favoritism, and Tension Among Siblings