Aging, Community and Health
RESEARCH UNIT

McMaster University

RESEARCH BRIEF

Online Interventions for Family Caregivers

KEY POINTS

- ✔ Online interventions may result in decreased depressive symptoms, stress, and anxiety for informal caregivers.

- ✔ While informal caregivers find value in online toolkits, such as MyTools4Care (https://www.mytools4care.ca/), additional online resources would help caregivers identify and navigate local resources to meet their specific needs.

- ✔ Websites for caregivers provide valuable information but they need to be easier to navigate and use.

What is this research about?

Family caregivers of older adults with multiple chronic conditions (MCC) are challenged with balancing many caregiving responsibilities and demands. Web-based programs can offer a means of support to these caregivers. This three-part study investigated online interventions for family caregivers of older adults with MCC:

1] A **rapid evidence review** of the impact of Internet-based interventions on mental health, caregiving outcomes, and general health for caregivers of adults with chronic conditions (Ploeg et al., 2017 doi:10.2196/jmir.7564).

2] An assessment of caregivers' perceptions of the **online toolkit**, MyTools4Care (https://www.mytools4care.ca/), designed to support caregivers of persons (e.g., a loved one or friend) with dementia and MCC with changes they experience as caregivers.

3] An evaluation of **websites that provide information and support for caregivers** and recommendations for future online caregiver supports.

What did the researchers find?

1] **Rapid Evidence Review:** Researchers reviewed 17 studies that examined the impact of various Internet-based interventions on caregiving outcomes, such as mental health. Results suggest that Internet interventions may result in reduced depressive symptoms, stress, and anxiety.

2] **Online Toolkit:** Researchers interviewed 42 Ontario caregivers who used an online toolkit called MyTools4Care. Caregivers reported that MyTools4Care provided useful links to resources and supports and prompted them to reflect on their current situation and needs, and to consider what supports they may need in the future to assist them as caregivers. Caregivers appreciated the simple, clear layout of MyTools4Care and its ease of access. However, lack of time, technology challenges (e.g., computer failure or lack of comfort with the computer), and concerns about privacy deterred some participants from using the toolkit. Practical caregiving tips and strategies were important to participants in this study. They valued and learned from other caregivers' experiences (e.g., linked videos). There is a need to design online interventions for caregivers that are flexible and adaptable to the unique and changing needs of the individual at every stage of their caregiving journey.

3] **Websites:** Researchers worked with caregivers to identify and evaluate 14 websites designed to provide information and support to caregivers. There were several relevant websites and online toolkits that appeared to have helpful content, but often links were broken or outdated. Contact information such as a telephone number and/or an office address is a much-desired feature for these websites because it gives caregivers the opportunity to call or visit staff that can answer questions or give more information.

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Recommendations from this three-part study

1] Findings from the rapid evidence review suggest that there is value in continuing to develop, refine and implement internet-based interventions.

2] Caregivers who used the online toolkit, MyTools4Care, made recommendations to improve the content and format of this site as well as other online resources for caregivers. They suggested:

- Providing information about local resources that are personalized to their needs;
- Sharing practical caregiving tips and strategies;
- Creating opportunities to connect online with other caregivers; and
- Having user-friendly features that are easy to navigate.

3] Recommendations to improve website navigation and usability included:

- Building upon and improving searchability and usability;
- Standardizing existing caregiver information across Local Health Integration Networks (LHINs), which plan, integrate and fund local healthcare, improving access and caregiver experience;
- Developing strategies to enhance maintenance of existing websites, with provisions for ensuring content accuracy, regular website updates and ongoing financial support;
- Listing contact telephone numbers and/or office addresses so caregivers may have access to experts to discuss their issues, ask further questions, and/or ask for assistance with community and/or system navigation;
- Including strategies to address rural versus urban service access issues;
- Exceeding the Ontario Accessibility Standards (AODA) for website design;
- Obtaining Health on the Net Foundation (HON) certification (http://www.hon.ch/);
- Adding Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs);
- Ensuring fee-based services are clearly identified and explained and e-commerce components are secure; and
- Ensuring the site is mobile-friendly.

Where do we go from here?

We are currently conducting two meta-analyses on the impact of web-based resources on informal caregivers and persons with MCC.

STUDY LEAD
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About the Aging, Community and Health Research Unit (ACHRU)

ACHRU researchers promote optimal aging at home by designing and evaluating new and innovative community-based healthcare interventions to improve access to healthcare and quality of life. Studies focus on the prevention and management of multiple chronic conditions among older adults and support for family caregivers.

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