
THEIR HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

WHAT CONSTITUTES NORMAL AGING?

As your parents grow older, it will be important for you to distinguish between the normal signs of aging and those that indicate possible illness. While it is common to experience physical changes in later life, illness, confusion, or depression is not a “normal” part of aging.

“Normal” physical changes of aging are, for the most part, visible changes such as gray hair, drying and wrinkling of the skin and some sensory changes. While all older persons do not experience diminished sensory capacity, many do experience vision problems, hearing problems, and a reduction in the sense of touch and taste. And, energy levels and strength and agility are often affected by age.

Changes in sleep patterns, pain, and unexplained weight loss or gain are not normal parts of the aging process and signal problems that should be discussed with a health care professional.

HEALTH ISSUES THAT MAY NEED TO BE ADDRESSED

A number of diseases and conditions that frequently occur among the elderly may be mistakenly identified as part of the aging process, and thought therefore to be untreatable. The fact is, these diseases and conditions very often are treatable and should be addressed by a physician. A few of these include:

Adult onset diabetes	Glaucoma
Alzheimer’s disease	Heart disease
Arthritis	Lung disease
Cancer	Kidney and bladder problems
Cataracts	Macular degeneration
Dementia	Osteoporosis
Depression	Parkinson’s disease
Enlarged prostate	Vascular disease

“DAD WAS ABOUT TO BE RELEASED FROM THE HOSPITAL. MOM CALLED, SOBBING. SHE WAS SURE SHE WOULD MAKE THINGS WORSE BY NOT KNOWING HOW TO TAKE CARE OF HIM. I IMMEDIATELY ARRANGED FOR HOME NURSING CARE. MOM HAS NOW LEARNED HOW TO DO MUCH OF WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE AND A NURSE COMES EVERY NIGHT. SO THEY’RE ABLE TO STAY IN THEIR HOME.”

KAY, AGE 51
MINNESOTA

PRACTICAL HINT

To help you understand the various drugs your parent is taking, ask the pharmacist for a printout listing all prescriptions, including possible interactions and side effects.

If your parents are diagnosed with these or other illnesses, you will want to learn more about what can be done. In addition to your parents' or your own physician, there are many sources of information. The Directory of Resources on pages 40-60 lists organizations that provide information and services specific to various illnesses.

STAYING INFORMED ABOUT THEIR MEDICAL CONDITION

Try to become informed about the medical conditions of your parents. Most older people have one or more chronic conditions such as arthritis or high blood pressure which they are managing in partnership with their physician. The successful management of chronic illness is a key to continued good health. Make sure you ask questions and show your support of their efforts to remain healthy.

Ask your parents for the names of their physicians, a listing of all of the drugs they take — both prescription and over-the-counter — and the name of their pharmacist and drug store. This basic information can be vital if a parent is in an accident or unable to communicate with health care professionals. You can overcome any resistance on their part to provide this information by giving them your own vital health information in case something happens to you and suggest that it's a good idea for family members to share this information in case of emergencies.

If your parent is unsure of the reasons for taking certain medication that has been prescribed by their physician, offer to accompany them to their next appointment to help them discuss their medical condition with their physician. And, if your parent has been told that a condition that bothers them is a "normal" part of aging, suggest to them that a second opinion would be a good idea. Remind them that it is not "normal" to be sick.

OVERMEDICATION: RECOGNIZE IT . . . PREVENT IT

Overmedication and adverse interaction of drugs are a common problem for older people. Changes in the aging body sometimes result in an "overmedication" problem even when taking the same dosage of a drug that has been taken for many years. Also, many drugs have noticeable adverse interactions with food or other drugs in older people that would not occur in younger persons. And, prescription drugs can interact with over-the-counter medications to create a serious health problem.

Problems with medication can occur because the patient lacks adequate information to make informed choices about their schedule for taking prescription drugs, or over-the-counter medications. Physicians do not always provide adequate information to patients about drug interactions and patients often do not ask enough questions about side effects or interactions which may occur. Overmedication can occur when several physicians prescribe drugs for a patient, and are unaware of other medications the patient is taking. However, even if an older person sees only one physician, there are risks associated with medications related to drug interactions with over-the-counter drugs, food, alcohol, and changes in

health status. Problems can also arise when there is no system in place to ensure that medications are taken as prescribed.

If you notice confusion, personality changes, or changes in the overall well-being of your parent, you may want to suggest that they schedule an appointment with their doctor. In order for this appointment to be successful, your parent should take with them a list of all drugs — prescribed and over-the-counter — they are currently taking.

The pharmacist is also an excellent source of information about drugs and should be consulted as well as the physician. A pharmacist can discuss not only possible interactions and problems with a medication, but suggest strategies for managing medication as well. Your pharmacist can advise you and your parent if a visit to the physician and a review of medication is needed.

ADDITIONAL THINGS YOU CAN DO:

1. Help your parent make a list of prescriptions and over-the-counter medications they are currently taking. Go through their medicine cabinet and kitchen shelves with your parents and throw out all out-dated prescriptions and medications.
2. Make sure that they are only getting their prescriptions filled at one pharmacy or, if they are using a mail-away service, that anyone filling their prescriptions has the complete list of medications in their file.
3. Remind them to discuss any new prescriptions with their pharmacist to make sure they understand the possible side effects, possible interactions, and that the pharmacist has added it to their file.

YOUR PARENTS' WELL-BEING

Adults of all ages benefit from feelings of independence and autonomy. In later life, concerns about a loss of autonomy and independence can be barriers to asking for help or seeking assistance from family members and friends. One of the most common forms of help that adult children can provide for their parents is information about resources that are available to enhance their independence. Finding out about these resources is one of the most important gifts you can give to your parents.

Today there are many resources available to make the home safer and reduce the risk of accidents. There are also resources which increase the feeling of security and safety within the home. And, finally, there are many community services to help an older person by providing information or by providing a needed service.

The key to well-being in later life is the maintenance of a lifestyle that suits the individual. Helping your parent maintain their lifestyle and independence is sometimes a challenge, but with information about resources and services that fit their needs, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you are doing everything you can to be supportive of their needs and wishes. Remember, your parents have been making their own decisions all of their adult lives and will want to continue this practice as long as they are able.

PRACTICAL HINT

Personal Emergency Response

Systems (PERS) are a great gift idea. Suppliers may be found in your local yellow pages under Medical Alarms or Systems and Monitoring. Your parents' local hospital may also be able to direct you to PERS suppliers.

PRACTICAL HINT

Many newspaper, magazine, and book publishers offer large-print editions for individuals with vision problems. Consider giving these as gifts. A large-print lending library is also available at the National Association for the Visually Handicapped (see the Directory of Resources, page 53). Books on tape are another alternative for parents who miss being able to read.

When dementia or Alzheimer's Disease interferes with decision making ability, it is sometimes necessary for an adult child to help with decisions (see p. 27, Powers of Attorney). However, if both parents are living and one has some cognitive impairment, the most appropriate role for the adult child is to support the healthy parent and their needs and wishes — both for themselves and their spouse.

DAILY LIVES MADE EASIER

As our aging population increases in number, manufacturers are making many specialized products to help individuals remain comfortable in their homes. So-called "aids for daily living" are useful and generally inexpensive items that can make daily activities easier to perform for those with physical restrictions. Some of these devices are:

- Kitchen implements that make opening cans and bottles, peeling potatoes, and cutting and dicing vegetables easier
- "Reachers," pincer-like devices for people who have a weak grasp or limited mobility, to eliminate bending over or having to reach for objects
- Levers instead of door knobs, to eliminate a twisting wrist motion
- Bathing benches and hand-held showers for bathing with greater safety
- Pill crushers, for those who have difficulty swallowing medication
- Talking clocks, wristwatches, and calculators, for people with poor vision
- Automatic lifts, for beds and chairs
- Button loopers and zipper pulls, for easier dressing
- Specialized dinnerware, to enable eating with one hand
- Single lever faucets for kitchen and bath
- Touch-tone telephones with large numbers, speaker or hands-free telephones and TDD (Telecommunications Device for the Deaf)

Many pharmacies and the new superstores devote a section to products that serve the elderly, as do medical equipment dealers and local telephone companies. Home health catalogs, featuring many of these devices, are advertised in consumer health magazines.

Some examples of products and modifications that can make the home safer or more comfortable are:

- Bathtubs with doors for easy access
- Elevator-chairs that glide up and down stairways
- Handrails to aid rising and sitting
- Ramps, enlarged doorways, and lower kitchen and bathroom cabinets for wheelchair accessibility

PERSONAL EMERGENCY RESPONSE SYSTEMS

Installing a personal emergency response system (PERS) in your parents' home can relieve anxiety when your parents are alone. A PERS is a small device worn around the neck or on the wrist that allows the wearer to signal for help by pressing a button. The button activates a communicator located in the home that sends an emergency signal over a telephone line to a 24-hour monitoring center. The center attempts to determine the nature of the emergency and calls a relative, neighbor, ambulance, or the police. Studies show that users of these types of systems report heightened feelings of independence, security, and peace of mind.

FINDING LOCAL SERVICES

Most communities have human services agencies that may be able to assist you. To find out what your parents' community has to offer, contact the Eldercare Locator, 800-677-1116, sponsored by the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging. Another source is your parents' state Department of Aging or county Area Agency on Aging. These government-funded agencies will know what services are available in their area. See *Where You Can Turn for Help*, pages 33-35, and the *Directory of Resources*, pages 40-60, for more information on organizations that can assist you. There are also Web sites available that provide information about local services and quality care. See the *Directory of Resources* section for tips on using the Internet to help you locate services.

Many local resources are also listed in the telephone book. Yellow pages list businesses and nonprofit organizations under many categories, such as:

FACILITIES

Adult Day Care
Assisted Living
Hospices
Hospitals
Nursing Homes
Rehabilitation Centers
Retirement Communities
Senior Citizen Centers

HOME CARE

Home Health Services
Homes-Residential Care
Nurses
Visiting Nurses

PROFESSIONALS

Geriatric Care Managers
Geriatricians
Gerontologists
Nurses
Nutritionists
Social Workers

SERVICES

Elder Services
Geriatric Evaluation Centers
Human Services
Medical Claims Services

Resources may include independent services, and some hospitals, that have outreach programs to go into private residences to help with daily activities such as cooking, cleaning, personal hygiene, bill paying, and other paperwork. In some communities, volunteers, such as students and members of religious organizations, perform these kinds of services. Organizations such as Meals-on-Wheels also can help you care for your parents in their home. The blue pages, available in some telephone books, list federal, state, and city government offices which may also provide information.

PRACTICAL HINT

Keep in mind that the types, caliber, and accuracy of information provided by the Eldercare Locator (800-677-1116) or your parents' state Department of Aging and county Area Agency on Aging, can vary widely from area to area.

PRACTICAL HINT

Your older relative may be able to live at home much longer if their home is made safer and more accessible by assistive devices and home modifications. Examples include entrance ramps, grab bars, bathing benches in the bathroom, and personal emergency response systems.