

As Parents Get Older

As parents get older, we want to be reassured they are taking care of themselves and staying healthy. That can be hard to discern at times, especially if we live a distance away. The Mayo Clinic suggests these questions to think about as we consider the abilities and health of our older parents.

Are they able to take care of themselves? Pay attention to their personal appearance and to things around the house. Failure to keep up with personal hygiene, yard work, and housework might be signs of dementia, depression or physical impairments.

Is there an issue with memory loss? It's normal to forget things from time to time. However, asking the same question repeatedly; getting lost in familiar places; and becoming confused about time, people and places can be indicators of memory loss.

Are your parents safe at home? Here again, watch for red flags around the house. Do they have difficulty in navigating narrow stairways? Have either of them fallen recently? Are they having difficulty reading directions on medication containers?

Are your parents safe on the road? Driving can be challenging for older adults. If they are easily confused while driving or they have experienced a moving violation, it might be time to stop driving.

Have your parents lost weight? Weight loss without trying could be a sign that something is wrong. They may be experiencing a lack of energy, difficulty in grasping tools, or reading labels. They may have lost interest in eating, due to a loss of taste and smell. Weight loss can also signify other serious underlying conditions.

Are your parents in good spirits? Monitor your parents' moods and ask how they are feeling. A drastic change in mood or outlook could be a sign of depression or other health concerns.

Are they still social? Inquire about their activities. Are they staying connected with friends, their usual organizations or faith-based communities? Are they maintaining interest in hobbies and other daily activities? If they have given up on some of these activities, it could indicate a problem.

Are they able to get around? Note how your parents walk. Are mobility issues limiting their usual walking distances or activities? Would an assistive device, such as a cane or walker, help?

If any of these indicators exist, consider sharing your concerns with them. Talk with your parents about seeing a doctor and making changes. Including close friends in the conversation may help. Encourage regular medical check-ups where weight loss, changes in mood, or memory loss may be a concern. Maybe you or someone else could attend the doctor visit with them.

Discuss potential safety issues with your parents and work with them to make a plan to address them. Some simple home modifications may help in preventing falls. Transportation options may be discussed rather than driving themselves. Home care services may also be an alternative to assist with house cleaning, running errands, or in-home meals.

Contact the doctor for guidance if your parents dismiss your concerns. The doctor may need permission from your parents to discuss your parents' care. However, these discussions may give you and the doctor insight on future doctor visits.

Look into local agencies that offer aging assistance services. A local or area Agency on Aging would be a good first place to start. There may be social workers available that may evaluate your parents' needs and help connect them with local services.

Some older adults don't want to admit they can't do something on their own or don't realize they need help. They may not know where to start to look for assistance to help them remain as independent as possible.

It's important that they understand the problem and the proposed solution. Remind your parents that you care about them and that you want to help support their health and well-being, both today and in the years to come.

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