

6 Signs Your Parents Need Help

Experts explain the warning signs that may indicate your parents are having trouble managing on their own.

If your elderly parents seem to be having more trouble remembering conversations they have had with you, or appointments or other daily occurrences, when should it be a concern and what should you do about it?

Any sign of decline in your parents should be evaluated by a professional. We talked with two experts to identify six warning signs that your parents need help, some of the possible reasons why, and what to do about it.

Warning Sign No. 1:

Mom always took pride in her appearance. But lately, she doesn't bother to put on makeup and doesn't seem to notice arthritis or some other physical ailment is preventing Mom from doing her bathing, hair, laundry, and dressing routines. Is she having trouble sleeping at night or excessively tired during the day? Other possibilities include poor eyesight and dementia. Also, a decline in grooming habits could be a sign of depression. "Depression is very common in older people, and it's so often missed," says Virginia Morris, author of *How to Care for Aging Parents*. Is she taking a medication that is making her less attentive?

[Living with Alzheimer's: A Simple Guide for Families](#)

What to Do:

Arthritis. Talk to Mom about the tasks that are hard to do. Then make modifications and buy adaptive devices to make dressing and other activities easier. Replace buttons with Velcro, put her laundry detergent in a small, easily held bottle, and buy zipper pulls, sock grippers, and easy-fit clothing. Accompany Mom to a doctor visit and talk to the doctor about how to treat a physical condition that may be affecting Mom's daily activities. A referral to a specialist may be necessary.

"Good pain management, and taking medication before she has pain is important," says Jane F. Potter, MD, AGSF, president of the American Geriatrics Society (AGS).

"Be aware that exercise is not bad but actually improves function," she states. "After Mom has a general medical checkup to see that her heart and lungs are up to it, locate a community-based exercise program or get in touch with the Arthritis Foundation."

Sleep problems can lead to fatigue and less attentiveness. Medication side effects can also be a culprit.

Dementia. Sometimes organizing the closet with clothes for every day of the week can help. Help her with the laundry or contract with a service that will pick up and deliver laundry. See Warning Sign No. 2.

Depression. A number of issues may prevent Mom from telling you she feels blue, such as associating depression with the stigma of mental illness, concerns about insurance coverage, or an assumption that the feeling is normal for her age. She may not have mentioned her feelings to her health care provider.

"Depression can get overlooked in older people because they don't talk about it, and often they don't have the classic symptoms," says Potter, who is professor and chief of geriatrics at the University of Nebraska Medical Center, Omaha. "Their symptoms might include pain or constipation."

"Ask Mom, 'Do you often feel sad or depressed?' She'll try to minimize it, but ask how she's been feeling in the last two weeks." She advises checking out the resources on talking with a doctor about depression and other health topics available on the AGS Foundation for Health in Aging web site.

Also, let her know she's valued. "Reminiscence can be powerful," says Morris. Make an audio or video recording of her talking about her favorite teacher or her first dog. Look through photo albums with her and enlist friends and family members to stay in touch with Mom by phone, email, and personal visits.

Poor eyesight. Take Mom shopping for new clothes in colors and patterns that she likes and can see. Make sure the lighting in her closet is adequate. Make sure that she has had a thorough eye exam. But if she has permanent vision loss, be aware of all the aids available. These range from eyeglass magnifiers that will enable her to put on makeup to optical readers that project a book page, letter, or bill onto a large screen, and much more. Your state's vision rehabilitation services can provide information and teach Mom how to adapt to low vision.

Forgetfulness

Warning Sign No. 2:

Dad keeps forgetting to pay bills and misses appointments.

Possibilities. Forgetfulness in an older person always conjures up the fear of Alzheimer's disease, but this could also be from depression, side effects of medications, [fatigue](#)fatigue, or other medical conditions.

Dad might be having financial problems that you are not aware of which is keeping him from paying his bills and requiring him to miss appointments for which he can't afford a co-pay or medications.

What to Do:

Dementia. Don't delay in getting help when cognitive problems appear. "The earlier the diagnosis, the better," Potter tells. She recommends getting hard information about the time course and history of Dad's behavior. Whether it occurred suddenly or over time can be important in making a diagnosis. "Look at his checkbook to see when the problem began."

She says that with dementias, including Alzheimer's, there are medications that can slow the progression. You can also help Dad by advising him to quit drinking if he drinks. "Folks who have Alzheimer's and have two drinks a day have greater cognitive impairment. People are very willing to quit drinking once you explain that to them," she notes. But don't assume Dad has Alzheimer's. "It could be a reversible condition, such as a vitamin deficiency or adverse reaction to medication."

"A primary care physician should be able to determine if dementia is present through a brief medical exam," says Morris, an authority on eldercare who lives in Sag Harbor, N.Y. A thorough exam by the primary care physician or geriatric specialist should follow. "If the doctor dismisses the problem as old age, get another opinion." Get in touch with your local Area Agency on Aging, which can be found at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration on Aging web site (www.eldercare.gov). "They often will have a social worker who will talk to you or come to your parent's house and do an assessment."

Becoming Isolated

Warning Sign No. 3:

Mom used to go out with her friends all the time, but now she just sits at home and watches TV.

Possibilities. Mom's behavior could signal depression or the onset of dementia. "But perhaps the problem is that she has become incontinent," says Morris. "She's afraid to go out, and she's too embarrassed to tell you."

Medical conditions associated with atigue and hormone abnormalities (such as hypo- or hyperthyroidism) and medication side effects could also be contributing. Keep in mind that not taking drugs that you should be taking can also be a problem.

Ask Mom if there is a reason why she isn't getting out the house more often. Possibilities include hearing loss, which affects one-third of people over age 60, and one-half over age 85.

What to Do:

Incontinence. Mom needs to know there are effective treatments, including medication, exercises, and regularly scheduled bathroom visits. "Unless the doctor asks, a lot of people think it's normal for their age, says Potter." About 70% of incontinence can be improved or cured. Most often the basic treatment is behavioral."

Hearing loss. Get an evaluation by an audiologist. It may take experimenting with different devices to find a hearing aid that's satisfactory. Also, help Mom stay in touch by teaching her to use the Internet and email, if she doesn't already.

Medications. Go over all of Mom's medications and how she is taking them. Does she sometimes forget to take a pill? Is she taking extra doses of drugs on her own or by accident? Using a pill box with special compartments for the different days of the week can help ensure Mom takes the right pills each day. Discuss side effects of medications with the doctor to see what alternatives are available or if the dosing or time of taking the drug can be adjusted

Older Drivers

Warning Sign No. 4:

Dad hasn't had a serious accident yet, but he runs over curbs, and last week he even backed into his closed garage door.

Possibilities:

When was the last time Dad had his eyesight checked? Or it may be that he has just gotten careless. According to AARP, older drivers often have problems in situations that require quick responses, full vision, and interaction with other drivers. Is he falling asleep at the wheel, such as might happen as a result of poor sleep or side effect of medication. It's also possible that Dad has dementia or a disease or drug side effect that affects coordination.

What to Do:

Eyesight. Dad should get his vision checked. Also, make sure his rear view mirrors are properly adjusted.

Carelessness. Don't just wait for Dad to lose his license at his next driver's exam, says Morris. He should sign up for a driver refresher course such as one offered by AARP, which might even qualify him for a deduction on his auto insurance premium.

Dementia or medical disease. In more serious cases his behavior signals a need for an evaluation by a geriatric specialist. If you must insist that he stop driving, be sensitive to what this loss of independence means to him, and help him line up alternative transportation with family, friends, and senior transit programs. Check with the local American Red Cross chapter which may be able to provide volunteer drivers for medical appointments. Also see Warning Sign No. 2.

Warning Sign No. 5:

Mom lives in another state, and she's had several falls.

Possibilities: A balance disorder, medical condition, medications, or risky behavior could be at fault. Also, alcohol, by itself or combined with medications, could be a problem.

What to Do:

Immediately remove throw rugs or electrical cords that Mom could trip over. Make sure that lighting is adequate when she goes to the bathroom during the night, and provide a handrail and seat for the shower. Check outside for loose paving stones or poor lighting on stairs.

Balance disorder or medical condition. These conditions can vary widely in their degree of severity. A visit with a physician for a thorough exam can shed some light on the possibilities. Evaluation by an occupational or physical therapist may be necessary. If it is related to a treatable medical condition or adjustment of current drugs, the doctor can take care of that.

Medications. "Make sure one doctor knows all the medications she's taking," says Morris. "The problem could be drug interactions." Or side effects of medications.

Risky behavior. Talk to Mom about not doing risky things such as standing on a chair to change a light bulb.

Alcohol. If Mom drinks, talk about her use of alcohol, and explain that she can't drink like she used to. If alcohol abuse is present, consult with professionals at an alcohol treatment center. They might recommend Alcoholics Anonymous for her and Al-Anon for you.

Loss of Weight

Warning Sign No. 6:

Dad claims he's eating, but he's lost a lot of weight.

Possibilities: Medication might cause loss of appetite or inability to taste food. Perhaps he has problems chewing, swallowing, or digesting food. Arthritis might make food preparation more trouble than it's worth. Weight loss can also be a sign of depression. Maybe he doesn't have money left after buying prescriptions and paying utilities, and he's too proud to tell you.

What to Do:

Talk to Dad to find out the underlying cause and address it. In addition, see the doctor for a thorough exam. Unexpected weight loss can be a warning indicator of serious disease such as diabetes or cancer. Some other possibilities include:

Medication. The doctor might be able to prescribe an alternative.

Arthritis. If Dad likes to cook, but his hands are cramped with arthritis, there are all sorts of adaptive cooking aids. If reaching up is a problem, move pantry foods to a lower shelf. Similarly, lower an overhead microwave oven.

Depression. See Warning Sign No. 1.

Problems with eating. Dad might need dentures or to be refitted for new dentures. He might need evaluation for pain or difficulty in swallowing or eating. Problems like acid reflux might need some advice on diet changes and medication recommendations from Dad's physician to help make eating easier.

Finances. Help him out if possible. Check with the Area Office on Aging to see if he qualifies for assistance.

Morris states that adult children need to talk to their parents about the future before any of the above warning signs appear. Once you open the door, it isn't as scary to talk about.
