



How Do I Know If My Parents Need Help?

We live in a very mobile society where families don't always live in the same town or even the same state for that matter. Unlike the "old days", entire families throughout America don't have the opportunity to come together as often as they would like. That's why the holiday season has become an important time to take stock of our loved one's health and everyday living capabilities. Family gatherings with loved ones from out of town, or even the more frequent family phone calls from long distance relatives, are a perfect time to 'check up' on seniors living on their own.

It is not uncommon for the adult children of seniors, especially the Baby Boomer generation, to have some concerns about how their parents are doing. In fact, according to the Family Caregiver's Alliance, families provide 80 percent of the long-term care in this country. This holiday season while you are enjoying your visits or on the phone with your aging loved ones, make good use of your time by reviewing their living status.

Using Your Five Senses

Many holiday traditions tempt your five senses. These same senses can be put to use in evaluating the status of elderly family members. Below is a checklist using each of your five senses to determine if your family members are in need of additional care or assistance.

Sight – Looking at the senior's appearance can be a sign that they are being limited either physically or mentally from completing otherwise normal daily tasks. Watch for things like clothes with stains, poor personal hygiene and a disorganized or dirty house.

Sound – Listening to what and how seniors speak can tell you a lot about their current mental status. You should not assume that "old age" is causing these problems. Do they call you by name? Are they speaking normally? Are they staying involved in outside activities?

Smell – Using your nose as an indicator to determine if your relative is bathing properly, cleaning their house or have spoiled food in their kitchen.

Taste – Tasting their food and sorting through their medications can help you determine if they are eating healthy or taking expired medications. Look at expiration dates and for fresh and stocked pantry items.

Touch – A simple hug can tell you if your family member is fragile or losing weight. Is their skin soft and the color normal? Do they have any bruising or tearing of the skin?

Review Status By Phone

During telephone conversations, gently probe for information about the person's health and well-being. Below is a list of sample questions that are key indicators or warning signs to help determine if your family members are in need of additional care or assistance:

- What did you have for breakfast? If your loved one cannot remember what he/she ate for breakfast that morning, forgot to eat breakfast or the meal appears to lack nutritious value, a memory problem could be setting in.
- Did you go to the beauty salon to get your hair cut? Did you use the new shower gel I bought you? These are good 'backdoor' questions to finding out whether or not your loved one is remembering to take care of his/her hygiene.
- Did you make it to Bingo this week? An early sign of depression is withdrawal from social activities.
- Is your loved one speaking normally? Differences in speech patterns are warning signs for medical problems that should be looked into immediately.

Help is Available

If you sense a problem based on the above indicators, you and other family members should waste no time in taking the appropriate next steps. As difficult as the process might be, keep reminding yourself that by being proactive, as a result of your observations, you will not only provide safety for your family member, but will also keep them happy and healthy for years to come.

As a result of assisting many families throughout [INSERT CITY] during this difficult process, here is some advice based on the experiences we encounter every day while working with these families. Below are the next steps that you and your family should follow:

1. Discuss the situation with the individual - Don't be afraid to ask or talk to your aging family members. Often seniors will not tell you if they are having trouble unless you ask. It is important to reassure seniors about your questions. They do not want to lose their independence and are afraid of being moved out of their home into a strange environment.
2. Make a doctor's appointment for the individual – Be sure and make the appointment when you, another family member or someone else can relay the concerns directly to the doctor. If you are not able to be there in person, schedule a time to call the doctor.
3. Determine what services are available in their community – Talk with local social service agencies or community organizations such as a local Area on Aging office or church group.
4. Make minor adjustments in their lifestyle – It may be necessary to bring in outside help to provide companionship and to assist with daily activities such as meal preparation, light housekeeping, trips to their doctor's appointments, etc. Here are some questions to consider when selecting a caregiver:
 - Is the care provider a home care agency, employment agency, registry/broker, or an independent contractor?
 - How long has the agency been providing private duty home care?
 - How does the agency screen and select caregivers prior to an assignment? Do they hire independent contractors or are they employees of the agency?
 - Are references and criminal backgrounds checked on all employees?

- Is there a health care professional, who along with the client and family develops an individualized plan of care? How are emergencies handled after normal business hours?

5. Use this time to plan ahead for unforeseen events –Take this time to establish advanced directives including establishing a power of attorney, will, living will, etc. There is no such thing as being too prepared.

Remember, the holiday season is a time for family, togetherness and establishing lifelong memories. By taking the time to address these issues before they reach the crisis stage, your family will have the much-needed sense of security, comfort and hopefully the ability to create new memories with your aging loved ones for many years to come!