



Holidays a time you may discover your aging parent needs help

Madison - During the holiday season, many people will visit with an aging parent who they haven't seen for several months and begin to notice signs that their parent may need support. When visiting a parent, take time to evaluate and observe how they are doing. Take time to talk about their health and their wishes for when they need assistance or can't care for themselves. Don't wait for a crisis, such as a stroke or a fall, to begin these conversations or to begin providing assistance.

"There are warning signs that a parent may need some assistance," says Mary Brintnall-Peterson, University of Wisconsin-Extension program specialist in aging. According to CareGuide.com (at <http://www.careguide.com/>), the following signs may be evidence that you should explore with your parent how they are doing and if assistance might be helpful or needed.

1. Is your parent unsteady while standing, or bruised from a fall? Falls are common among older adults. It is estimated that one-third of older adults living at home experience a fall each year. Those who fear falling often restrict their activities, which can lead to weakness, making them even more likely to fall.
2. Do they look thinner or are they eating poorly? Do they have trouble complying with a special diet? Many older adults experience poor nutrition and weight loss. Significant weight loss can be dangerous to overall health, and is often caused by health conditions, depression, dementia, medications, alcohol or limited finances.
3. Does your parent feel depressed? Changes in physical health and level of independence may lead to less social activity, anger and depression. Although as many as 25 percent of older adults may suffer from depression, many physicians fail to diagnose it because the symptoms are often similar to other medical conditions.
4. Does your parent have trouble getting out of the house, or are they no longer driving? For many older adults, no longer driving can mean a loss of independence, making them feel isolated and less connected to the outside world.
5. Does your parent have difficulty remembering a major event? Difficulty with memory can be attributed to a number of things. Cognitive impairment, such as dementia, can result in confusion, wandering and aggression. It is important to have a physician evaluate the person's cognitive capabilities.
6. Does your parent have difficulty keeping track of medications? Older adults face serious health risks if they do not take medications appropriately. They may forget doses, take the same dose twice or take duplicate medications without realizing they are the same.
7. Is your parent's house disorganized, or are chores undone or bills unpaid? Everyday household maintenance can be overwhelming for some older adults with decreased strength and stamina. They may need help to manage everyday activities.
8. Are there potential hazards in your parent's home, such as extension cords or basement stairs? Hazards in the home include thick carpets, dim lighting, impaired vision and overmedication.
9. Is your parent having difficulty making it to appointments and running errands? Older adults sometimes have trouble getting to appointments, picking up prescriptions, groceries, and more. This puts them at risk of not getting all of their everyday needs met.

10. Has someone close to your parent recently become ill or passed away? It's common for older adults to get along with the help of someone else (a spouse, neighbor, etc.) When that person becomes unable to continue providing assistance, the older person's needs become more apparent to everyone involved.

"If any of these warning signs apply to your parent, you should begin to gather certain information for planning for their care," says Brintnall-Peterson. Find out what medical conditions your parent has. Learn what income and assets they have to pay for care and elder services? Find out what plans they have made to address their long term care needs and what their personal preferences are. And think about your own capability for caregiving. If you are the primary caregiver, how much time, energy and money do you have to contribute to your parent's needs?

"The most important first step is talking to your parent about getting help," says Brintnall-Peterson. Issues related to aging are not easy to discuss. Many older adults are reluctant to talk about their declining health, limited physical functioning and increased dependence. Adult children may be uncomfortable facing their parents' mortality and taking on new responsibilities.

Brintnall-Peterson offers these suggestions for beginning the discussion:

- It's never too soon to begin planning while your parent can participate in making decisions.
- Ask open-ended questions. Phrase your concerns as questions to allow your parent to express their concerns and preferences. Learn about the plans they have already made.
- Set an agenda for the discussion. Establish several issues that need to be talked about, such as finances, housing, health care, household chores, etc.
- Don't avoid negative issues. It won't benefit anyone to gloss over the issues of financial resources or a worsening medical condition.
- Be supportive. Remind your parent that your goal is for him or her to get the best care possible, and that you want to honor their preferences.
- Accept your parents' feelings and preferences and make a sincere attempt to address them.
- Be patient. Don't be disappointed if decisions aren't made in the first discussion.
- Seek guidance or an outside opinion. Consult with a doctor, accountant, lawyer, clergy or other advisor before taking any medical, financial or legal steps.

Visit the web site of the Wisconsin Alliance for Family Caregiving, <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/caregiving/> to learn about family caregiving resources. For the location of your county or tribal Aging Office, consult www.dhfs.state.wi.us/aging/contacts/COAGOF.HTM Also contact AARP Wisconsin at 1-866-448-3611 (toll-free) or email to wistate@aarp.org. Their web site at <http://www.aarp.org/> includes resources in English and Spanish, and a free online seminar on Planning for the Care of Aging Parents.

Provided by Mary Brintnall-Peterson, Ph.D., Program Specialist in Aging at the University of Wisconsin-Extension. For more information or questions, please contact Mary by phone, (608) 262-8083, or by email, mary.brintnall-peterson@ces.uwex.edu This publication is distributed through the Wisconsin Alliance for Family Caregiving web site, <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/flp/caregiving>