



Encouraging Healthy Habits In Adult Loved Ones

If you're caring for an older loved one, your caregiving responsibilities may vary depending on how much care your loved one needs. However, living a healthy lifestyle is something you can always encourage. This guide provides information to help you understand the normal signs of aging in seniors, as well as tips to help a loved one live more healthily—and fight the effects of aging—by eating a nutritionally sound diet and staying active (within the guidelines provided by his or her doctor).

Nutrition

For a variety of reasons (the result of disease, injury, medication or simply normal aging) smell and taste begin to decline at approximately age 60 in most adults. Often, this leads to loss of appetite and even malnutrition in some adults. Maintaining a nutritionally sound diet is important for all individuals, but it can be especially important for seniors who are trying to stay healthy and active. The following tips may help your loved one maintain a healthy diet:

- Encourage your loved one to choose from all the basic food groups—protein, dairy, cereals and grain, vegetables and fruit—each day.
- Limit the use of canned and frozen foods, which can be higher in sugar or salt.
- Improve the taste of food by adding herbs or spices.

Elizabeth's husband John has slowed down markedly over the past few years. Elizabeth explains, "Although John tires more easily and is not as physically active as in years past, he still enjoys afternoon walks, reading, playing cards and volunteering. How do we know how much he can safely do? And what can we do to ensure that he remains healthy and fit enough to continue participating in the activities he now enjoys?"

- Be sure that your loved one drinks enough fluids throughout the day to avoid dehydration and to facilitate elimination.
- Keep fresh fruit handy for snacks. (If your loved one wears dentures, select soft fruits only.)
- Ask your loved one's physician if a daily multi-vitamin would be appropriate.

Note—If your loved one suffers from diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, lactose-intolerance or some other medical condition additional dietary guidelines may need to be followed. Discuss your loved one's specific dietary needs with his or her doctor.

Finally, keep in mind that several meal-delivery programs, such as Meals-on-Wheels, deliver nutritionally sound meals to adults who are too frail, ill or physically challenged to prepare meals themselves.

As the ability to taste and smell decreases, older people may have less interest in eating. As a caregiver you can counteract this sensory loss by seasoning your loved one's food separately and a bit more strongly than your own. Use a variety of herbs and spices to give his or her food more "pep." Don't, however, load up on salt, which encourages water retention and can boost blood pressure. Use salt in moderation only.

Exercise

Speak to a doctor about your loved one's health and mobility to determine what level of exercise, if any, is appropriate. Regular exercise can help maintain or restore balance and agility; decrease dizziness sometimes caused by vision changes; and lessen the risk of falls. Physical activity also provides some protection against other chronic diseases such as adult-onset diabetes, arthritis, hypertension, certain cancers and osteoporosis. And, exercise can reduce depression, ease tension and promote feelings of well-being and self-esteem.

Physical activity need not be strenuous to achieve health benefits. Older adults can obtain significant health benefits with a moderate amount of physical activity, preferably daily, even if it's just a walk around the block. Before beginning any exercise program, make sure your loved one has a complete physical examination and approval from a doctor.

Mental Stimulation

Mental activity, or spiritual and intellectual interests may help keep your loved one active and interested in life, and less likely to suffer from loneliness or depression.

Here are some activities that may help keep your loved one active and involved:

- Joining seniors' groups, community or religious activities, or adult day care programs.
- Participating in book discussion groups
- Gardening (which can also provide some exercise benefits)
- Volunteering
- Enrolling in classes (e.g., art, education, cooking, photography). *Note*—College courses are often offered free of charge to people aged 65 and older.
- Attending bridge clubs, sewing groups or other social activities

In general, encourage activities and hobbies that interest your loved one. If you have any questions or concerns about the appropriateness of an activity, consult a doctor.

Understanding Normal Signs of Aging

As a caregiver, you should be aware of both normal signs of aging—and warning signs that may indicate a problem. Some of the most visible changes that take place in people as they age—graying hair, wrinkles and changes in skin pigmentation—have absolutely no effect on their ability to function. Yet other normal signs of aging, such as hearing and vision impairments, do have an effect—sometimes minimal, and sometimes more profound. Following are some common signs of aging and tips for handling them, as well as potential warning signs that may require a visit to a doctor.

Hearing Impairments In Older Adults

According to the National Institutes on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (NIDCD), one in three people 65 to 74 years of age have hearing loss, and almost half of people over age 75 have hearing loss. Following are some common hearing impairments among older adults:

- **Presbycusis** (prez-bi-'kyü-ses) is characterized by sensitivity to high-pitched sounds. Victims may have difficulty understanding what others are saying, particularly individuals with high-pitched voices, and have problems following conversations in large groups or with background noise.
- **Otosclerosis** (ot-o-skle-'ro-ses) is caused by an overgrowth of tissue around the bones in the middle ear, and is characterized by gradual hearing loss in one ear, which eventually progresses to both ears.
- **Tinnitus** (tin-'nite-es) is a constant or intermittent ringing, roaring or other noise inside the ears, which may be caused by ear wax; an ear infection; excessive use of aspirin, antibiotics, sedatives or anti-inflammatory drugs; high or low blood pressure; allergies; diabetes; or head and neck injuries.

Tips for Communicating with the Hearing Impaired

Hearing impairments can make communicating with a loved one difficult and frustrating at times, but the following tips may help:

- Make sure you are in your loved one's visual range when speaking to him or her.
- Get your loved one's attention by raising your arm or waving; touching may be unnecessarily startling.
- Face your loved one and speak slowly, clearly, distinctly and in a low tone. Avoid shouting.
- Stand where there is good lighting and low background noise.

- Use facial expressions or gestures to give useful clues.
- Reword your statement if necessary and be patient.
- Include your loved one in all discussions to prevent feelings of isolation.
- Install an amplifier on the phone and turn the ringer up as loud as possible.

If your loved one complains of hearing problems, or if you recognize signs on your own, consult a doctor. Often, there are simple steps a medical professional can take to improve hearing.

Visual Impairments In Older Adults

Loss of vision can put older adults at greater risk for falls and injuries in addition to generally limiting activity. Common eye diseases among older adults include:

- **Cataracts**, a disease that causes clouding of the lens of the eye (or its surrounding membrane) and obstructs the passage of light. It is primarily caused by the aging process, and is most prevalent in people over 70 years of age.
- **Glaucoma**, characterized by loss of vision, is caused by progressive damage to the optic nerve generally with elevated pressure within the eye.
- **Macular Degeneration**, a retinal disease that impairs central and color vision, is caused by a breakdown of the macula, or the central portion of the retina.
- **Diabetic Retinopathy**, the leading cause of blindness among adults, affects mainly diabetics. It occurs as a result of high blood sugar levels over a prolonged period.

Tips for Helping the Visually Impaired

If your loved one is visually impaired, the following tips may help:

- Return objects to the same place after they are used. Sometimes moving objects just a short distance can make it difficult for your loved one to locate them.
- Place colorful tape along the edge of steps to alert your loved one to a change in level.
- Remove throw rugs from the floor. These could cause your loved one to trip and fall.
- Consider buying voice-capable equipment, such as talking clocks, calculators, scales and computers.
- Tape large print labels to containers of canned or frozen goods in the kitchen.
- Use high mark or spot line markers to make appliance buttons, dials or labels more visible.
- Ask your bank about special checks with raised or large print. Many banks supply these checks at little or no extra charge. Pay-by-phone and online bill paying options offer another alternatives to paying bills by check.
- Purchase or borrow audio books (available on CDs and cassette tapes) or audio magazines from your local bookstore or library.
- Use a magnifying glass (some even have built-in lights) to enlarge the print of newspapers and books, and aid in sewing or other small tasks and hobbies.
- Use the clock method to help your loved one locate food if he or she has severely limited vision. For example, “Your meat is at 9 o’clock, your potato is at 12 o’clock and your carrots are at 3 o’clock.”

If your loved one complains of vision problems—or if you recognize them on your own—consult a doctor.

Sleep Disorders In Older Adults

As people grow older, sleep patterns are altered, making a good night’s rest more elusive. Common causes of sleep disorders in older adults include:

- Medical problems—including arthritis, heartburn, osteoporosis and heart and lung disease—as well as some of the drugs used to treat these conditions
- Frequent urination, which may make nighttime risings common
- Psychiatric conditions, including depression and anxiety
- Nighttime aches and pains, which can lengthen the time it takes to fall asleep and interrupt sleep thereafter
- Medications, such as antidepressants (prescribed for depression) and antihypertensives (prescribed to control high blood pressure)
- Daytime napping, which may make your loved one less tired at bedtime

Tips to Promote Restful Sleep

If your loved one is having difficulty falling asleep or sleeping through the night, consider the following suggestions:

- Give your loved one a light snack or warm drink before bed (unless your loved one is incontinent or wakes in the middle of the night having to use the bathroom).
- Make sure your loved one uses the bathroom before bed to avoid having to get up in the middle of the night.
- Make sure the bedroom is a comfortable temperature—not too hot or cold.
- Don’t give your loved one caffeine (found in coffee, tea, soda, chocolate, and some over-the-counter medications) late in the day, which can lengthen the amount of time it takes to fall asleep.
- Don’t give your loved one alcohol, which may speed sleep onset, but leads to disrupted sleep later in the night.

Though some sleep variations are normal signs of aging, severe sleep disorders (insomnia and/or excessive sleeping) can indicate a health problem and should be checked out by a doctor. If problems persist, your doctor may suggest that you consult a sleep specialist—a doctor skilled in diagnosing sleep problems.

Emotional Changes In Older Adults

Expect some emotional changes from your loved one. Losing his or her sense of independence, no matter how slight, can be both frustrating and scary. Age also brings a certain degree of emotional change as well, which may be characterized by occasional bouts of depression, frustration or confusion. While some emotional change is normal, it is important to watch out for extreme mood swings or behaviors that may signify a medical or psychological condition such as depression or dementia.

Depression. Older adults suffer from depression more than any other age group, possibly because they often experience major life changes, such as the loss of a spouse or changes in finances, health or living environments. Although it takes time to get over a loss or sudden change, extreme grief can lead to depression.

If you recognize any of the following signs of depression in your loved one, consult a doctor:

- Feelings of sadness, boredom, hopelessness or apathy over an extended period of time
- Decreased interest and participation in activities, particularly those your loved one previously enjoyed
- Noticeable physical changes (e.g., stomach problems, extreme loss of appetite, confusion, severe headaches and/or sleep changes, etc.)
- Suicidal feelings. If your loved one mentions suicide, seek professional help immediately; don't try to handle it on your own.

Warning Signs

Some of the changes you attribute to normal aging may actually signal an illness. Here are some warning signs to watch out for:

- Chronic pain or a limiting condition, such as arthritis or osteoporosis
- Frequent falls
- Incontinence
- Persistent memory loss that interferes with daily activities
- Sudden weight loss or weight gain
- Sudden changes in personality
- Confusion
- Excessive sleeping

If you notice any of the above symptoms in your loved one, do not assume it is a normal part of aging; have your loved one examined by a doctor.

Confusion. Sometimes confusion is a passing response to changes in diet, health, environment, medications or other life circumstances. Other times, however, it may indicate that your loved one needs medical attention. Signs of confusion include problems with decision-making and judgment; unresponsive behavior; loss of memory; impaired ability to think or understand abstract concepts; and disorientation with regard to time, person or place. If your loved one acts confused for periods of time, notify a doctor. Confusion and/or dementia can be caused by many diseases, most of which are treatable. Extreme symptoms of confusion, however, could indicate Alzheimer's disease—a progressive, degenerative disease that attacks the brain and results in impaired memory, thinking and behavior.

Driving and Your Aging Loved One

Aging can bring on physical and/or psychological changes such as hearing or vision impairment and confusion. As a result, you may need to limit or prohibit certain activities, such as driving, which can be potentially hazardous. If your loved one drives, make sure he or she is not putting him or herself or others in danger.

To help assess your loved one's driving performance, ask yourself the following questions:

- Does your loved one have difficulty seeing traffic lights, pedestrians or other cars?
- Does your loved one have difficulty distinguishing the colors of traffic lights?
- Does your loved one make inappropriate driving decisions such as putting on the brakes too abruptly, driving too slowly or drifting into other lanes of traffic?
- Does your loved one seem confused about directions at times, or get lost in familiar areas?
- Does your loved one forget to signal when changing lanes or turning?
- Has your loved one had one or more accidents, near misses and/or traffic citations in the past year?

If you answered “yes” to even one of these questions, your loved one may be at risk by continuing to drive. Discuss your concerns with your loved one immediately, but be sensitive. Driving represents a certain sense of freedom and independence, and losing the ability to drive may affect your loved one's sense of self and well-being.

Unless you feel strongly that your loved one should not be driving at all, begin by asking your loved one to make some of the following concessions:

- Limit hours of driving.
- Avoid driving in inclement weather (e.g., snow, rain, fog, etc.).

- Stick to main roads where street lamps, traffic lights and street signs make driving easier.
- Be sure all parts of the car are in working order and that windows and mirrors are kept clean.
- Consider equipping your loved one with a cellular phone and an automobile club membership in case of emergencies.
- Enroll your loved one in a “refresher” or “senior” driving course (for example, AARP's “55 and Alive”) that not only teaches driving techniques but may also qualify your loved one for discounts on car insurance.
- Wear a seat belt at all times.

If your loved one is no longer capable of driving safely, try to prohibit it. Enlist the help of other family members, or contact a doctor for help. Oftentimes, it is easier to convince a person to stop driving if a doctor prohibits it rather than a family member or friend. As a last resort, remove the car keys, or contact the Department of Motor Vehicles for suggestions on how to keep an unsafe driver off the road. Most importantly, provide alternate modes of transportation so giving up driving is not so difficult.

Helpful Resources

Meals on Wheels Association of America

203 South Union Street

Alexandria VA 22314

703-548-5558

www.mowaa.org

This organization sponsors local Meals on Wheels programs, which deliver hot meals to home-bound elderly people. Call toll-free to find out about programs in your area.

The American Dietetic Association

120 South Riverside Plaza, Suite 2000

Chicago, IL 60606

800-877-1600

www.eatright.org

This hotline provides referrals to dietitians in your area.

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