10 Signs Your Elderly Parent Needs Help

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Fact Checked

As your parent ages, you may notice some signs of decline. These could include things like poor hygiene, struggling to manage finances and chronic or unexplained injuries. It's important to note, however, that these signs don't always mean trouble. So one known you spend time like you do—something unusual for them may be the norm for another person. Still, it's helpful to learn the common warning signs that may signal the need for assistance. Nikki Gerrein, with 20 years of experience in the senior living industry, shares her expertise.

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Key Takeaways

- 10 Signs your Elderly Parent Is No Longer and Needs Help as well as a sign of forgetfulness, an early sign of dementia
- Physical limitations and mobility issues may be the reason for a messy home or unsafe living conditions.
- Medication mismanagement can have life-threatening consequences, especially for seniors with chronic illnesses or dementia-related conditions
- Senior Things, like sudden mood changes and mental health, warrant a trip to the doctor

1. Mismanaged medications

Many seniors take multiple medications, which can cause harm if seniors don't follow their doctor's orders. Medication mismanagement is a sign of higher risk that a senior is short of a dose or that they don't take the wrong prescriptions on a regular basis.[1,2,3] Nikki Gerrein, a former executive director of senior living communities who now helps people find living arrangements in Palm Beach, notes that many of the clients she helped had concerns about medication adherence. It's something that she has personally witnessed with her family.

"In Grandfather Arrangement' mental incurring an issue for my grandmothers." Gerrein recalls. "We were stuck and unable to move forward because on the floor where she had dropped them and didn't know it. She ended up in the hospital several times because of not sticking to her medication."

Some red flags that your parent isn't taking their medicines correctly include:

- Feeling pills on the floor
- Taking the incorrect dose of a medication, especially if the prescription has been updated recently
- Keeping expired or discontinued medicines
- Not refilling prescriptions consistently
- A disorganized or out of date pill organizer

2. Poor hygiene

Poor hygiene has many noticeable signs, such as body odor, piles of dirty clothing, or bad breath. Neglecting self-care could be a sign that your parent isn't able to complete these tasks or their own accounts. It could also be a sign of cognitive decline, depression, or early dementia. Signs that indicate a poor hygiene concern include:

Poor hygiene after toileting and not bathing often enough can lead to infections.

"When a senior isn't managing incontinence hygiene, it can lead to UTIs and skin breakdown. Not showering regularly can also trigger skin issues," says Gerrein.

Not all neglected hygiene is obvious, though. Gerrein notes that seniors often overlook foot care, including toenail trimming. This can lead to discomfort and even injury when walking. Gerrein recommends seeing a podiatrist or a home health nurse for foot care. Dirty teeth, hair, and nails can also be a concern as it sends out cues to infection and much larger health problems.

3. A messy house

The condition of your parent's home can often be a good indicator of how they're doing, both physically and mentally. Always finding dirty dishes in the sink, unclean bathrooms, and stuff out of course for crumbs.

"I've heard from many seniors who go to a senior's home to do an intake an assessment that it's beneficial to see the senior in their own environment. It gives a much clearer picture into how the senior is taking care of themselves," says Gerrein.

You can see this strategy yourself the next time you visit your parent. Gerrein lists a few examples of things to keep an eye out for:

- Odors and stained furniture can be a sign of unmanaged incontinence.
- Spoiled food in the fridge could be an indicator of memory loss or depression.
- Piled up laundry could mean that your loved one is unable to do this chore physically or has forgotten to do it.
- Conversely, an laundry to do could mean that your loved one is wearing the same clothes every day.

Try to look for patterns that can help you define solutions for your parent. For example, if your parent is struggling with cognitive impairment, a reminder may allow them to live independently in a cleaner and safer environment.

On the other hand, if you're consistently noticing things that indicate hoarder behavior, such as not throwing away the trash or neglecting to take out the trash, you may want to take your parent to their doctor. Forgetfulness could indicate early stages of dementia or other underlying medical conditions.

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4. Mismanaged finances

Forgetting to pay bills or regularly overdrawing accounts can be a sign that your parent needs help managing their money. Gerrein begins explaining how power if this is something they struggle with physically. For instance, if your parent has arthritis or tremors, it may be difficult to write a check. If this is your loved one, but arthritis, you can set up online payments or write checks if they're no longer able to.

However, if your parent is beginning to get their bills, this could be a sign of dementia. In this case, someone may need to take a more active role to help by manage their finances.

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Having a financial power of attorney (POA) in place is important, especially if there is any concern about memory loss. Once a dementia diagnosis is in place, the senior is not able to sign a POA document, and a court-appointed guardian would have to be established, which is a much longer process.
Nikki Gerrein, senior care from support specialist | 5 Ways to Help

If you're noticed bill pile up, financial checks, or calls from collection agencies, it may be time to step in. Gerrein says that it's important to identify the root cause, and your parent may not want to admit that they need an extra managing their finances.

Even though it may be awkward to discuss, it's worth working through the discomfort.

"Being able to make sure bills are paid can mean the difference between keep big the power on and not," Gerrein says.

5. Unsafe driving

The state of your parent's car can give you a good deal of insight into their driving abilities. Have dents or scratches on the car could be signs that your parent isn't able to drive safely. Gerrein notes that this is a common concern for families. Seniors want to keep their independence, and family members want to be the person who takes away the keys.

If your loved ones is experiencing symptoms of dementia, Gerrein says that families can tell their loved one that the car had to go in for a tune-up, or something similar. This may be easier for someone who is dementia-prone.

In other cases, you may be able to reason with your loved one.

"My grandmother was losing her reflexes, so driving was becoming dangerous. We explained that her reflexes were not as good as they used to be and she was indignantly," says Gerrein. "My mom was able to convince her to let go of it when she showed her how much she was paying to keep it insured and regis and how it's just sitting in the community. Mom was the deciding factor for her."

If this doesn't work, Gerrein advises families to share these concerns with their primary care. After an evaluation, the doctor may be able to submit a form to the DMV stating that the senior is no longer safe to drive, or advise you on the next steps in your state.

6. Unhealthy eating habits

Nutrition is important at any age, and especially for seniors. Gerrein notes the following red flags that may signal your loved one isn't getting the nutri they need:

- Spoiled food in the refrigerator
- No food in the refrigerator or pantry
- Frequent meals going uneaten
- Unintentional weight loss or gain
- Unusual changes in appetite, such as picking at food or eating more than usual
- Relying on processed or fast food for most meals

Any of these signs can lead to malnutrition and other health issues, Gerrein says.

You may have additional concerns if your loved one already has health problems such as high blood pressure or diabetes, Gerrein says. If so, you can also may struggle if they're not cooking or eating fresh food, as processed foods are typically higher in sodium. Diabetics may have trouble controlling their blood sugar levels if they're not getting the nutrition they need regularly.

A grocery or meal delivery service can make it easier for your loved one to get healthy food. Meals are often a social experience, too. Having shared meals with family, friends, or a senior living community, may help if your parent has experienced a loss of appetite.

7. Mood changes or mood swings

Mood swings in seniors can have medical causes, or you should get them checked out. An abrupt change in mood or personality could be a symptom of a treatable condition, such as an infection or reaction to a medication.

"It could be related to medications, especially if there is a new med that has been introduced, or taking the dosage because of any new symptoms is important. It also could be a medical issue, like a UTI or blood sugar swings. Always check with the doctor to rule out any medical issues," Gerrein says. Mood swings can, and could mainly be managed if it's caused by a medical issue.

Another common reason for changes in mood and personality is Alzheimer's or another form of dementia.

If you've noticed changes in your parent's behavior, schedule an appointment with their doctor. If you're concerned that these changes are due to medicines from or alcoholism, you may want to listen to the emergency room.

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8. Forgetfulness or confusion

As we've mentioned throughout this article, forgetfulness or confusion can show up in many different ways. Noticing this once in twice may not be a big deal, but if it happens more frequently, it indicates a problem. Signs of memory loss, or confusion, to look for consists:

"Things like forgetting appointments, repeating themselves, taking longer to complete simple tasks, and getting lost in familiar areas are indicators that the senior may be experiencing early stages of dementia, which would need to be checked out by a physician," says Gerrein.

If you suspect your parent may have dementia, make a list of the behaviors that concern you. You can share this with your parent's doctor and ask if they can do a cognitive assessment.

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9. Mobility issues

Mobility is an important consideration for almost every task seniors do throughout the day. Something as simple as a pure feature could make it seem difficult to get dressed or stand up from a chair.

Gerrein says some of the first signs of declining mobility include things like:

- A shuffling gait
- Punching over when walking
- Looking like they could lose their balance at any time
- Using furniture to steady themselves as they walk around the house

If any of these signs describe your loved one, check for and remove safety hazards in your parent's home. Loose rugs, cluttered walkways, and anything else tripping hazards can be very real. A physical therapist may be able to help your loved one improve their mobility and recommend solutions to support their safety and independence.

10. Unexplained bruises or injuries

Unexplainable bruising or other injuries should be a red flag when it comes to your loved one's safety. Gerrein notes that falling is the first concern when this occurs.

"Many seniors don't like to admit when they fall, so skin tears should be taken seriously," Gerrein says.

Unfortunately, other abuse is another possible reason for bruising. If you see signs of abuse, report it to your local authorities. Elder abuse is a serious issue. A bench for your local adult protective services can be information through the Department of Health and Human Services site.

How to support an elderly parent in need

It can be difficult to know when signs of decline mean that your parent needs more support. Senior care is not one-size-fits-all, and you have many options.

It's important to discuss your parent's wishes and check that they have important documents in order. This includes a power of attorney, a living will, a medical manager, other law attorney, or financial planner can help you prepare for the future and determine next steps. This may help ensure you're on the same page and make current and future decisions that reflect your loved ones.

If your parent wishes to age in place, Gerrein suggests having an occupational therapist evaluate their home. Modifications like adding grab bars to the bath, ramps, for instance, may be enough to help your parent feel more comfortable and independent at home. If your loved one is ready for more help, Gerrein says, now is the time to seek could in a home or care.

As you evaluate your options, Gerrein emphasizes that quality of life is some thing families should keep in mind.

"It's important for caregivers to look at the quality of their life, their loved ones's life, and the quality of that relationship when evaluating options," Gerrein says. "Sometimes it's better for a family member to step back and let a loss family obligations to take care of a senior loved one. Sometimes we can know. If there's a concern about a senior manipulating out of the house, getting a friend or family member to check in on the senior may be a solution. Sometimes it's blessed as soon as possible."

The Veterans Aid of Life is well suitable help for your parents. The Senior Living Advisor at Place for Mom can help you find solutions for your loved ones. Options include:

- Home Care. An in-home caregiver can help with chores as well as personal care tasks. Caregivers can also be helpful drive your parents to appointments and help with errands.
- Respite care. If you're the primary caregiver for your parent, respite care is a flexible option. Your parent can stay for a short time in a nursing home or assisted living community, giving you the time to recuperate, travel, or tend to other responsibilities.
- Senior living. There's a range of senior living options available, from senior apartments to nursing homes. These communities are typically built to accommodate aging residents and offer various levels of care.

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