Aging parents: 7 warning signs of health problems

Concerned about your aging parents’ health? Use this guide to gauge how your aging parents are doing — and what to do if they need help.

By Mayo Clinic staff

As your parents get older, how can you be sure they’re successfully taking care of themselves and staying healthy? When you visit your aging parents, ask yourself the following questions. Then, if necessary, take steps to help your aging parents maintain their independence.

1. Are your aging parents taking care of themselves?

Pay attention to your parents’ appearance. Are their clothes clean? Do they appear to be taking good care of themselves? Failure to keep up with daily routines — such as bathing, tooth brushing and other basic grooming — could indicate dementia, depression or physical impairments.

Also pay attention to your parents’ home. Are the lights working? Is the heat on? Are the bathrooms clean? Is the yard overgrown? Any big changes in the way your parents do things around the house could provide clues to their health. For example, scorched pots could mean your parents are forgetting about food cooking on the stove. Neglected housework could be a sign of depression, dementia or other concerns.

2. Are your aging parents experiencing memory loss?

Everyone forgets things from time to time. Modest memory problems are a fairly common part of aging, and sometimes medication side effects or underlying conditions contribute to memory loss. There’s a difference, though, between normal changes in memory and the type of memory loss associated with Alzheimer’s disease and other types of dementia. Consider your aging parents. Are memory changes limited to misplaced glasses or an occasionally forgotten appointment? Or are memory changes more concerning, such as forgetting common words when speaking, getting lost in familiar neighborhoods or being unable to follow directions? If you’re concerned about memory loss for either of your aging parents, schedule an evaluation with the doctor.

3. Are your aging parents safe in their home?

Take a look around your parents’ home, keeping an eye out for any red flags. Do your parents have difficulty navigating a narrow stairway? Has either parent fallen recently? Are they able to read directions on medication containers?

4. Are your aging parents safe on the road?

Driving can sometimes be challenging for older adults. If your aging parents become confused while driving or you’re concerned about their ability to drive safely, it might be time to stop driving. To help your aging parents maintain their independence, suggest other transportation options — such as taking the bus, using a van service, hiring a driver or taking advantage of other local transportation options.

5. Have your aging parents lost weight?
Losing weight without trying could be a sign that something’s wrong. For aging parents, weight loss could be related to many factors, including:

- **Difficulty cooking.** Your parents could be having difficulty finding the energy to cook, grasping the tools necessary to cook, or reading labels or directions on food products.

- **Loss of taste or smell.** Your parents might not be interested in eating if food doesn’t taste or smell as good as it used to.

- **Underlying conditions.** Sometimes weight loss indicates a serious underlying condition, such as malnutrition, dementia, depression or cancer.

If you're concerned about unexplained weight loss for either of your aging parents, schedule an evaluation with the doctor.

6. **Are your aging parents in good spirits?**

Note your parents' moods and ask how they're feeling. A drastically different mood or outlook could be a sign of depression or other health concerns. Also talk to your parents about their activities. Are they connecting with friends? Have they maintained interest in hobbies and other daily activities? Are they involved in organizations or clubs?

If you're concerned about your parents' moods, schedule an evaluation. Depression can be treated at any age.

7. **Are your aging parents able to get around?**

Pay attention to how your parents are walking. Are they reluctant or unable to walk usual distances? Is knee or hip arthritis making it difficult to get around the house? Would either parent benefit from a cane or walker? Issues such as muscle weakness and joint pain can make it difficult to move around as well. If your parents are unsteady on their feet, they might be at risk of falling — a major cause of disability among older adults.

**Taking action**

There are many steps you can take to ensure your aging parents' health and well-being, even if you live far away. For example:

- **Share your concerns with your parents.** Talk to your parents openly and honestly. Knowing that you're concerned about their health might give your parents the motivation they need to see a doctor or make other changes. Consider including other people who care about your parents in the conversation, such as other loved ones, close friends or clergy.

- **Encourage regular medical checkups.** If you're worried about a parent's weight loss, depressed mood, or other signs and symptoms, encourage your parent to schedule a doctor's visit. You might offer to schedule the visit yourself or to accompany your parent to the doctor — or to find someone else to attend the visit. Ask about follow-up visits as well.

- **Address safety issues.** Point out any potential safety issues to your parents — then make a plan to address the problems. For example, perhaps your parents could use assistive devices to help them reach items on high shelves or to help them stay steady on their feet. A higher toilet seat or handrails in the bathroom might help prevent falls.
• **Consider home care services.** If your aging parents are having trouble taking care of themselves, perhaps you could hire someone to clean the house and run errands. A home health care aide could help your parents with daily activities such as bathing and dressing. You might also consider Meals on Wheels or other community services. If remaining at home is too challenging, you might suggest moving to an assisted living facility.

• **Contact the doctor for guidance.** If your parents dismiss your concerns, consider contacting the doctor directly. Your insights can help the doctor understand what to look for during upcoming visits. Keep in mind that the doctor might need to verify that he or she has permission to speak with you about your parents' care, which might include a signed form or waiver from your parents.

• **Seek help from local agencies.** Your local agency on aging — which you can find using the Eldercare Locator, a public service of the Administration on Aging — can connect you with services in your parents' area. For example, the county in which your parents live might have social workers who can evaluate your parents' needs and put them in touch with pertinent services, such as home care workers and help with meals and transportation.

Sometimes aging parents won’t admit they need help around the house, and others don’t realize they need help. That’s where you come in. Remind your parents that you care about them and that you want to do what’s best to promote their health and well-being, both today and in the months and years to come.