

Aging parents: Five warning signs of health problems

From MayoClinic.com

Special to CNN.com

Now that your parents are getting older, you want to make sure that they're taking care of themselves and staying healthy. But it's difficult to monitor the health of your aging parents from miles away. Use your next visit with your parents to ask about their health and find out if there's anything you can do to help them maintain their independence.

Sometimes your parents won't admit they need help around the house. Other times they just don't realize they need help. Here are five things to look for on your next trip home, to help you gauge whether your aging parents need assistance.

1. Have your aging parents lost weight?

Many people think that being thin is healthy, but losing weight without trying is a sign that something's wrong. Weight loss could indicate a significant health problem in your aging parents, such as:

- Cancer
- Dementia
- Depression
- Heart failure
- Malnutrition

Talk to your parent if you think your parent's weight loss may be a sign of illness. Encourage him or her to schedule a doctor's visit. Note, though, that the reason behind your parent's weight loss isn't always disease-related. Your parent could be having difficulty finding the energy to cook, grasping the tools necessary to cook or reading labels or directions on food products. Age-related changes to your parent's body could mean that nothing tastes as good as it used to. Talk to your parent about your concerns. Together you can find ways to make cooking easier or to make food more appealing.

2. Are your aging parents safe in their home?

Take a look around the home, keeping an eye out for any red flags that might indicate that your parents are having trouble maintaining their home. Are the lights working? Is the heat on? Has the well-maintained yard become overgrown and wild? Are there dirty dishes in the sink? Is the home cluttered with piles of newspapers and magazines?

Think in terms of safety. Do your parents have difficulty navigating the narrow stairway? Have your parents mentioned any recent falls or injuries? Note any changes in your parents' hearing and vision. Difficulty reading directions on prescription medications or difficulty hearing a doctor's advice or instructions could pose safety threats.

Any big changes in the way your parents do things around the house could provide clues to their

health. Scorched pots could mean a parent with dementia is forgetting about dinner cooking on the stove. Neglected housework could mean depression is robbing your parent of the motivation to take care of the home. Light bulbs that haven't been replaced could indicate that physical impairments make it impossible for your parents to keep up with the regular maintenance around the house.

Point out potential safety issues to your parents. Together you may be able to devise a plan to fix these problems.

3. Are your aging parents taking care of themselves?

Pay attention to your parents' appearance. Notice if they're keeping up with their usual personal hygiene routines. Are your parents' clothes clean? Do your parents 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 health problems. Dementia, depression or physical impairments could be to blame.

4. How are your aging parents' spirits?

Note your parents' moods. Everyone has good and bad days, but a drastically different mood or outlook could be a sign of depression or other health concern. Ask your parents how they're feeling. Do they seem withdrawn or blue?

Talk to your parents about their activities. Are they still connecting with friends? Have they lost interest in hobbies and other daily activities? Are they involved in social organizations or clubs? If they're religious, do they attend regular services?

Tell your parents if you think they seem down or depressed. Encourage your parents to see their doctor and talk about their feelings.

5. Are your aging parents having difficulty getting around?

If your parents have any health conditions that make it difficult to get around, they may have difficulty caring for themselves. For instance, your parents may experience muscle weakness, joint problems and other age-related changes that make it difficult to move 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? Does your parent need a cane or walker? Talk to your parents about ways to make getting around easier.

If your parents are unsteady on their feet, they may be at risk of falling. Falls can cause major injuries and even death in older adults. The good news is that you can help your parents prevent falls by making their home safer and helping them stay active.

What to do if you have concerns about your aging parents

Talk with your parents if you have any concerns about their health and safety. Knowing that you're concerned about their health may be all the motivation your parents need to see their doctor. Some parents may need a little more encouragement, so let them know that you care about them and that you're worried. Consider including other people who care about your parents in the conversation, such as other relatives, close friends or clergy.

Together you and your parents can come up with solutions to problems around the home. Perhaps your parents could use assistive devices to help them reach items off shelves or to help them stay steady on their feet.

In talking with your parents, you might decide that it's time for them to get some help around the house. Home care service workers can help with small tasks, such as errands and cleaning. Or it may be time to consider a long term care facility, such as an assisted living center.

If your parents aren't willing to listen to your concerns or if they dismiss your claims, you can take other measures. Call your parents' doctors for guidance. Your parents' doctors can't discuss private information with you, but they may be glad to hear your insights. Some signs of medical problems aren't easily spotted in a doctor's office, and your concerns may help the doctor understand what to look for in your parents on their next visit.

You can also seek help from local agencies. For instance, the county in which your parents live may 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. Your local agency on aging — which you can find using the government's Eldercare Locator — can connect you with services in your parents' area.

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December 12, 2005

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