

Warning Signs: Does Your Aging Relative Need Help?

by Kathleen Donnelly for MSN Health & Fitness

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Home for the weekend, a grown-up daughter opens her mother's refrigerator to find a moldering steak with expiration date months past. A son watches as his always-thrifty father hands a \$20 bill to a stranger simply because he's asked for money. At the end of a holiday visit, a brother and sister compare notes: How much weight has Dad lost, and when did Mom stop meeting her bridge group?

The details change, but the story line is the same. Your aging family member says she's fine, but your observations leave you doubtful. How do you know when your loved one really does need help?

"Look for change," says Donna Schempp, a licensed clinical social worker and program director at the [Family Caregiver Alliance](#), a nonprofit group that supports people who are caring for their older relatives. "You've got to see these as warning signs."

Changes in behavior can mean a number of things. It could be your mom needs a doctor to make sure her medications aren't causing her confusion or that your dad needs someone to talk to about his feelings of sadness. The changes could be a sign of illness, increasing forgetfulness or decreasing ability to handle all of the daily chores involved in living independently.

Seeing unusual behavior one time may be an aberration, says Sandy Markwood, chief executive officer of the [National Association of Area Agencies on Aging](#), an organization that represents more than 650 agencies that deal with the elderly. But if you see three or four signs of change, Markwood says, it's time to talk to your loved one.

Not that the talk is anything most adult children look forward to. Denial on both sides is rampant, says Mary Lynn Pannen, incoming president of the National Association of Professional Geriatric Care Managers and CEO of Sound Options, a company that assesses needs, arranges services and monitors care for older clients. But as hard as it is to face up to the changes in store for your relatives don't wait until you see dozens of signs before you take action.



If you do see signs of trouble, it may be time to make an appointment for an assessment, either with your parent's health care provider or with a private geriatric care manager, such as those who work with Pannen.

Pannen, a registered nurse and certified care manager, describes an assessment as "looking at the whole person" to find out what kind of help the client may benefit from.

Care managers from her company, all nurses, first take a health history, checking blood pressure and listening to their clients' hearts and lungs. Next they look at how their clients function in their homes, for example, asking them to get in and out of the shower. They check to see if the clients know what to do in an emergency, ask about their social connections, make sure homes are safe and dig into legal and financial questions, such as whether their clients are paying their own bills and whether anyone in the family has power of attorney.

Finally, working with the family, they develop a plan of recommendations.

"Elder care is complicated and it's changing all the time," says Pannen. "But a care manager can at the least get clients and families thinking about the options."

Is it time for an assessment? Keep an eye out for changes.

A Dozen Warning Signs

1. Weight loss or weight gain. In the U.S., where more than half of us could stand to drop a few pounds, we often see all weight loss as good weight loss. But if your parent is losing weight without trying, says Schempp, it could be a sign of [depression](#) or another illness. Weight gain, on the other hand, might mean your loved one is surviving on a diet of doughnuts—also not good.

2. Neglects personal grooming. It's a hard problem to admit, but if your dad is wearing dirty clothes, has bad breath or body odor, or forgets to shave or brush his teeth or hair, he may need help, especially if he's always been fastidious.

3. A home that's not clean. If your childhood memories of home include the ever-present aroma of pine cleaner, discovering dirt and clutter—especially in the bathroom and kitchen—is not normal.



4. Spoiled food in the refrigerator or insufficient food in the house. It could be a sign that your loved one is growing forgetful or that she has lost her appetite.

5. Piles of unopened mail or unread newspapers. Everyone gets behind in reading, but finding lots of unopened mail or stacks of untouched newspapers may signal forgetfulness or confusion.

6. Missed bill payments or changes in finances. Does your dad need help handling the finances? Past-due notices are a sign that he may. Schempp suggests looking for a cancelled check so you can see if your loved one is still able to fill out a payment correctly.

7. Changes in judgment. If your mom never used to give money to strangers, it's unusual that she's starting now. Pay attention to the decisions, financial and otherwise, that your family member makes.

8. Quits activities he or she once enjoyed. Has your mother given up going to church? Did your father stop having lunch with his friends? Have they stopped watching their favorite TV shows? Take note if your parents give up activities they once enjoyed. It could be a sign of depression or other health problems.

9. Friends or neighbors notice a change. Those who see your parents frequently can be good partners in their care, especially if you don't live nearby and can't visit often. If neighbors tell you your loved one is acting strangely, ask for details.

10. Unusual physical problems. Do you see more burns or bruises? They may be signs of forgetfulness or possibly [problems with medication](#) or alcohol. It's also important to take note of chronic diseases, such as [high blood pressure](#) or [arthritis](#), that may affect your parents' ability to live independently. [Falling](#) is a sign of trouble, as is dizziness.

11. Can't manage daily tasks. Can your parents bathe themselves, use the toilet, climb stairs? Can they drive safely or even call a cab?

12. Unable to get help. Can your parents use the telephone to call for help? Do they keep a list of people they can call near the phone? Do they remember to dial 911 in an emergency? Can they hear the smoke alarm?

