

10 Red Flags That Signal Its Time To Think About In-Home Care or Assisted Living

By Susan Oderwald, Always Best Care Director for Lower Fairfield County and Greater Bridgeport

Experts agree that taking a proactive approach to aging is best. Being proactive means educating yourself and your family about what options are open to you as you age, and taking the steps necessary to preserve your health and independence as long as possible. For most of us, this means there will come a time when living at home alone is no longer safe or desirable. At this point, you owe it to yourself to explore your options for getting help in your home, or to move into an assisted living community.

This obvious truth is easier said, than done. Unfortunately, most older adults deny they need help until it's too late and/or they suffer a catastrophic event, such as a fall, illness or stroke. At that point, choices about where and how you live may be temporarily or permanently limited, and the adjustment to both a new physical condition, combined with a new living situation, is much more traumatic.

So what are the signs that it's time to get serious about getting help in your home, or moving onto an assisted living community? Below are 10 red flags that indicate the need for help NOW!

1. **Close calls and falls** – Have you recently taken a fall or had some kind of accident in your home or while driving? Accidents happen, but as we get older, the odds rise of them happening more frequently. Falls are a particularly important signal. There are many reasons we fall more as we age, but it is the consequences of falls that make them such an important problem. Injuries from falls can be catastrophic, and even minor falls can damage your quality of life and ability to remain active. If you have fallen more than twice in the past year, it's time to talk with your doctor and an in-home specialist about steps you can take to be safer from falling.
2. **Lingering colds and coughs** – Our ability to quickly bounce back after an illness diminishes as we age. However, a cold or cough that takes more than 2-3 weeks to resolve, or cases where one is chronically catching colds, is an indication that you might be run down – perhaps undernourished, perhaps exhausted from doing too much and no longer coping well on your own.
3. **Worsening of a chronic condition** – many older adults have ongoing chronic conditions such as diabetes, COPD, dementia and others. As with lingering colds, the worsening of these conditions can be a sign that you are undernourished, run down, or, perhaps are not sticking to your medication and prescribed therapies the way you should. As we get older, sticking to our medication regime and doing all the other things prescribed by our doctors is critical to keeping chronic conditions in check. Failure to keep up these regimens is a signal that help is needed.
4. **Noticeable changes to your physical stature** – have you noticeably lost or gained weight, or increasingly become unsteady or unbalanced? These are signs you should have checked by your physician, and can be indications that your routines and activities are no longer working well.
5. **Are you keeping up with regular hygiene** - be honest. Are you experiencing any difficulty standing in front of a mirror, getting in and out of the shower, or keeping your arms up while brushing your teeth and hair? Do you avoid bathing because you are fearful of falling? Have you simply lost interest in your appearance and are no longer bothered by being unbathed? These, and many other items, are symptoms that you may no longer be physically able to care for yourself, or that you are

depressed. Self-neglect can also be an indication of Alzheimer's disease, or other cognitive dysfunction. These symptoms strongly indicate that help is needed.

6. **Look at your surroundings** – are there piles of unopened mail, unread magazines, unpaid bills, etc. These can be signs that your memory is not what it once was or that you have lost interest in keeping up your surroundings. Being overwhelmed by routine bill-paying or not taking any interest in magazines subscriptions you once enjoyed can indicate depression. It can also be a signal that one's cognitive function is worsening. For some, the loss of a spouse, who used to take care of the mail or bills, can create a feeling of dread or desperation about routine paperwork. Getting help with managing mail, bills and filing may be needed.
7. **What's happening in the kitchen?** Are you cooking fresh and nutritious meals or are you eating primarily pre-packaged frozen dinners? Is your fridge or cabinet full of expired food? Are you ordering take-out or eating out every day? Have you had any fires, accidents or difficulty lifting pots and pans? All of these are signs that you are likely sacrificing good nutrition to avoid shopping and cooking. While most of us eat less as we age, it is still very important that we consume good, wholesome meals. Eating well promotes many important aspects of healthy aging, and conversely, if you are not cooking and eating well, you are undermining many aspects of your health as you age.
8. **Are you becoming isolated in your home?** When asked, most people say they want to live at home as long as possible. This is certainly a realistic and healthy goal for many, but not all. Living alone, or living with a loved one suffering from serious medical problems, can be very isolating. Being unable to drive – even if it's only at night – can keep you from once treasured social activities. If you find yourself not leaving your home for days, or even a week at a time, you are probably too isolated. For many, assisted living communities offer opportunities to socialize with others around common interests, or just at mealtime. This may be especially important for those who have lost a spouse or close friends. For others, having someone come into your home once a day or a few times a week to help take you to activities, or to simply spend time with you doing things around the house, can do wonders.
9. **Grime in the bathroom?** For many, keeping up with housekeeping can be a physical challenge. When things are getting difficult, people tend to keep the public areas of their house clean, but start to neglect those areas that are more private. The personal bathroom is often a neglected room that will show if you are not really able to keep up with all your housework anymore.
10. **Pets and plants are neglected** – Neglected animals and dying plants are a definite red flag that something is wrong. Many seniors no longer keep pets as they age, but if you do, and your pet is not doing well for lack of exercise or attention, it may be that you need some help to manage your pet at home.

While some of these items are much more serious than others, all are indicators that it is time to take a look at getting help in the home, or finding an assisted living community that's right for you. Advanced aging and physical decline may be a difficult time of life, but it can also be a very rich and meaningful time. Finding the right living situation as we age is integral to how long and how well we spend our final years.

To talk to a specialist about what options are best for you or a loved one, call Susan Oderwald, Always Best Care, Milford, CT at 203 877 1377 for a no cost/no obligation consultation.