

How Do I Know It Might Be Time for Assisted Living?

Recent Accidents or Close Calls

Did your loved one take a fall, have a medical scare, or get in a fender bender (or worse)? Who responded and how long did it take? Accidents do happen, but as people get older, the odds rise of them happening again.

A Slow Recovery

How did the person you're caring for weather the most recent illness (for example, a flu or bad cold)? Was he or she able and willing to seek medical care when needed, or did last winter's cold develop into untreated bronchitis?

Increasing Difficulty Managing the Activities of Daily Living (ADLs) and Instrumental Activities of Daily Living (IADLs)

ADLs and IADLs are the skills needed to live independently—dressing, shopping, cooking, doing laundry, managing medications, and so on.

Noticeable Weight Loss

Does the person feel thinner? Are clothes loose, or has he or she added notches to his or her belt? Many conditions, from depression to cancer, can cause weight loss. A person who is having trouble getting out to shop or remembering how to cook (or to eat) can lose weight; check the fridge and watch meal-prep skills.

Seeming More Frail

Do you feel anything "different" about the person's strength and stature when you hug? Can your loved one rise easily from a chair? Does he or she seem unsteady or unable to balance? Compare these observations to the last time you were together.

Strange Body Odor

Unfortunately, a close hug can also reveal changes in personal hygiene habits. Causes range from memory trouble to depression to other physical ailments.

Changes in Appearance

Does the person's hair and makeup look all right? Are clothes clean? Someone known for crispy ironed shirts who's now in a stained sweatshirt may lack the dexterity for buttons or may have lost the strength for managing an ironing board and iron. A formerly clean-shaven man with an unkempt beard may be forgetting to shave (or forgetting how to shave).

Snowdrifts of Mail in Various Places

Finding lots of mail scattered around raises concern about how bills, insurance, and other matters are being managed.

Lots of Clutter

An inability to throw anything away may be a sign of a neurological or physical issue. Papers or pet toys all over the floor represent a tripping hazard.

Unopened Personal Mail

Everybody skips junk mail, but few of us can ignore a good old-fashioned, hand-addressed letter.

Unopened Bills

This can indicate that your loved one is having difficulty managing finances—one of the most common first signs of dementia.

Letters from Banks, Creditors, or Insurers

Routine business letters aren't worrisome, but it's alarming if they're referring to overdue payments, overdrawn balances, recent accidents, or other concerning events.

Thank You Messages from Charities

Older adults are often vulnerable to scammers. Even those who have always been fiscally prudent are vulnerable if they're having trouble with thinking skills (a common sign of Alzheimer's disease). Some charities hit up givers over and over, and your loved one may not remember having donating the first time.

Lots of Crisp, Unread Magazines

The person may unknowingly have repeat-renewal subscriptions he or she doesn't need.

Stale or Expired Foods

We all buy more than we need. Look for signs that food is not only old but that this is unnoticed—mold, sour milk, or expiration dates well past due.

Multiples of the Same Item

Ten bottles of ketchup? More cereal than can be eaten in a year? Multiples often reveal that the shopper can't remember from one store trip to the next what's in stock at home.

A Freezer Full of TV Dinners

Your loved one may buy them for convenience sake, but frozen dinners tend not to make a healthy diet. If there's not much fresh food in the house (because it's too hard for the person to procure or cook), your loved one might be ready to have help with meal prep or delivery services.

Signs of Lax Housekeeping

Spills that haven't been cleaned up are a common sign of dementia—the person lacks the follow-through to tidy. Keep an eye out for cobwebs, bathroom mold, thick dust, or other signs of slackness. Physical limitations can mean your loved one needs housekeeping help or a living situation where this is taken care of for him or her.