

A Guide for People Who Care: Improving the Quality of Life

Older Americans and their caregivers sometimes fall victim to myths that become self-fulfilling prophecies. One of these is that being old means being sick. The other is that old age and dementia go hand in hand. The truth, however, is far more positive.

- **Truth # 1:** Old age and sickness are not synonymous. The majority of older people are healthy. If they are not, many chronic conditions and illnesses can be controlled or corrected.
- **Truth # 2:** While the incidence of dementia does increase as people age, the majority of older people score well on tests of mental functioning. Those who do not often have underlying medical problems that account for decreases in mental functioning.

Maximizing Your Care Receiver's Independence and Health

Keeping or restoring health in the later years often requires more effort and determination than when people are younger. It includes your care receiver following these tips:

- **Eat a healthy diet.** If your relative or friend has medical problems, you can ask the physician if changes in diet should be made and whether you should consult a registered dietician for additional information.
- **Take supplements of certain vitamins and minerals,** if advised by the physician or dietician. Always remember that more is not always better, that nothing takes the place of a healthy diet, and that some vitamins and herbs can be dangerous if taken in excess or in the presence of certain medical conditions.
- **Do exercise.** If your older relative or friend is reasonably healthy, he or she can begin a regular program of exercise including stretching, weight training, and low-impact aerobics after discussing it with his or her physician. Exercise can help to avoid accidents, improve strength and mobility, lower blood pressure, and help to prevent or control some diseases. If your care receiver is frail or ill, you can ask the physician about what exercises may be appropriate. Your older relative or friend may want to begin such an exercise program under a physical therapist's supervision. The physical therapist can show him or her how to do range-of-motion, stretching, and strengthening exercises. Over time, these exercises can help to increase strength and mobility.
- **Monitor, in consultation with your relative's primary care physician and pharmacist, both over-the-counter (OTC) drugs and prescription medications** to ensure that there are no adverse drug reactions or bad reactions between several drugs. Make sure that all medications are appropriate for your care receiver's individual needs and that the rules for safely taking drugs are being followed.

- **Stay involved with family and friends.**
- **Take part in community activities** such as going to senior center activities.
- **Keep an active mind with activities** ranging from reading to card and board games, as well as using a computer.
- **Learn about assistive devices** that can enhance your older relative or friend's independence and safety.
- **Ensure home safety** with such modifications as ramps and low thresholds, better lighting, and nonskid rugs to enhance your care receiver's safety and independence.

Choosing Health Care Providers

It is important for your older relative or friend to have a primary care physician (usually an internist, family medicine practitioner, or geriatrician) as well as specialists, if needed. When choosing physicians, make sure you check their qualifications. What is the physician's academic background and experience? Is he or she board certified in that particular practice area? You may want to accompany your older relative or friend to the appointment and take notes. This helps to ensure that you both understand what medical course of action is recommended and gives you the opportunity to observe the interaction between the doctor and your loved one.

The health care provider's attitude toward older people is important. Is he or she interested in caring for older people and willing to take the extra time to conduct a thorough examination, to ask questions, and to let you and your loved one ask questions?

Here is one note of caution—if your care receiver is not in managed care, try to choose health care providers that are either preferred or participating providers, if your insurance requires it to make standard payments. Otherwise, you may be responsible for a large percentage of the bill. This is also true for hospitals and all of their subcontractors, such as anesthesiologists. If your care receiver is limited in his or her physical abilities, ask the physician about the possibility of having physical, speech, or occupational therapy. You also should ask about assistive devices that are available.

: Administration on Aging, Department of Health and Human Services. (Updated 2007, January 11). *Because we care: How can I improve our quality of life?* Retrieved January 18, 2008, from <http://www.aoa.gov>

If you are a caregiver and feeling overwhelmed, contact Continuum EAP at: (402) 476-0186 or (800) 755-7636. You may also contact an employee assistance professional at: eespecialist@4continuum.com

