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December 23, 2021

Home for the Holidays: What Health Alerts to Look for When Visiting Elderly Relatives

 Jennifer Brullo · 3 days ago · 5 min read



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More than [109 million Americans](#) plan to travel over the holidays this year. While there is still much uncertainty around travel due to the pandemic, many Americans will be visiting older family members for the first time in months or even years. This long-awaited visit can be an excellent opportunity to not only share stories, laughter and meals, but also to check in on an older relative's health and wellbeing.

As someone who has been in home care for many years, I know that a person's home is truly the frontline of their health care. You can gain important information about their mental and physical status by carefully observing and listening to your loved one at home. Once you know what to look for, many small activities can provide great insight. *Do they hold on to the wall when they walk? Do they seem disinterested in food? Do they know when to take their medications?*

This is, of course, a warm and cherished holiday visit — not a health care evaluation! But here are a few things to look and listen for over the course of an afternoon or evening, while sitting in the living room telling stories or gathered around the dining room table to enjoy a meal.

Activities of Daily Living: Eating, Sleeping and Hygiene

These essential activities of daily living can be important windows into overall health and wellbeing, both physical and mental. Your loved one's basic functions may have deteriorated since you last saw them. Some signs may be obvious — they look tired or unusually thin. Others may be less so.

Eating: You may notice your loved one isn't eating much during your visit. This could raise a mental-health flag, as possible signs of depression or dementia. Loss of appetite could also suggest physical troubles such as gastrointestinal or dental issues, or it could simply mean your loved one is too excited to eat when everyone's gathered. Ask more questions, including about how and when they usually take their meals, and check the refrigerator to see if there's adequate food.

Sleeping: Ask about sleep habits, and make suggestions where you can (see [my previous post](#) on best sleep practices). Cognitive deficits, depression and anxiety can all be exacerbated by insufficient sleep, or can lead to it.

Hygiene: Amid pandemic isolation, many of us took less attentive care of ourselves. But keep your eyes open for deterioration in bathing or toileting. It could raise questions of depression or dementia, and could also indicate (or create) physical discomfort, such as skin or wound issues. Ask questions about regular showering, and probe a little deeper if you hear something that concerns you.



Falls risk: Strength, stability and mobility

Does your loved one lean to one side when they walk, or maybe even hold on to the wall for support? If they use an assistive device like a cane or walker, do they use it properly and consistently? Do you get worried each time they rise from or sit down in a chair? [One in four Americans](#) age 65+ will suffer a fall this year — so use this holiday visit to help cut down your loved one’s risk of a fall.

Many factors go into preventing falls, from maintaining strength and balance and ensuring that eyeglasses prescriptions are up-to-date, to keeping a home adequately lit and free of clutter and throw rugs. Many home care organizations, including the Visiting Nurse Service of New York ([VNSNY](#)) where I work, have falls prevention guides and programs to help keep your loved one safely on his or her feet.

Medication management

Ask your loved one about the medications they are taking (or medicines they have been prescribed; it doesn’t always amount to the same thing!). If you can, ask to see the bottles and make sure they know what each one is for and how to take it properly (and write down the names and dosages while you’re at it, so you can share that information with care providers when asked). Some [60 percent](#) of older adults taking five or more

medications do not take them properly. If they take several medications, ask about [blister packs](#) or using colorful pill boxes to organize the pill-taking.



Mental health

Be on the lookout for signs of depression and anxiety, which have been greatly [amplified](#) by the isolation and uncertainty of the pandemic. While they may be difficult to spot in a short visit, warning signs of depression include persistent sadness and anxiety, changes in sleeping or eating habits, fatigue and brain fog, and feelings of worthlessness. Here’s a link with [more information](#) on observing, listening for, and treating depression in elders.

Next steps

Depending on how you find your loved one, it may be time to have a conversation with them and other appropriate family members to see if caregiving help is needed. You may need to step up your own participation in caregiving, or you may need to arrange for a professional home care assessment in order to evaluate your loved one’s needs.

It’s often difficult to face the fact that a family member is growing older and may need assistance. Author [Cheryl Woodson](#), a doctor who writes about the ins and outs of caregiving, cautions against being an ostrich, putting your head in the sand and denying something’s wrong. In the act of caregiving, the first step can be summoning the courage to admit there is a need. Your sharp eye, open ears, and attentive questions can be an especially valuable gift this season in making sure your older loved ones stay as safe and healthy as possible at home.