

Keeping Your Loved One Safe

While all people would do well to concern themselves with the following safety issues, seniors are especially prone. This heightened risk is made even more apparent with lower functioning seniors. Particularly noteworthy safety concerns include:

- Falls
- Driving
- Medications
- Depression
- Scams

Falls

It should first be noted that falling is not a normal part of aging. One doesn't typically fall just because they are elderly. There are some general causes that may include: conflicting medications, poor vision, or neurological impairments such as vertigo. Slick or wet surfaces, such as those found on a bathroom floor or in a bathtub, area rugs that aren't slip-resistant, and even the layout of a room can contribute to falls if furniture is impeding clear walking paths.

Four Things to Help Prevent Falls

1. Begin your loved one on an exercise routine to strengthen their legs and improve balance
2. Review their medications to identify conflicting combinations
3. Schedule a vision exam for them to see if glasses are needed or if their current prescription is correct
4. And finally, make the home safer

The last item seems obvious, but the costs for completely outfitting a home for safety can range from relatively modest figures to being cost prohibitive, depending on the needs. Some cost-effective options include:

- Backings or double-sided tape under area rugs to prevent slippage

- Motion-activated night lights
- Grab bars around the toilet and in the shower
- Non-skid strips on stairs and in the bathtub
- Use of a cane or walker

On the issue of stairs, especially at the entryway, ramps may be installed to allow for a gradual incline that's easier to ascend while also giving accessibility for wheelchairs and/or motorized scooters.

Ramps are certainly on the higher end of cost, depending on the type selected, with the two most common types being modular and custom. In the bathroom, options like a Zero-Step Walk-In Shower are great for seniors but also very expensive. A less costly alternative would be installing a bath bench over an existing soaker tub. Additionally, installing grab bars, a shower stool, and a hand-held shower head are wise investments.

Finally, fear of falling can actually be a factor in increasing falls. Addressing any falling concerns with doctors and active caregivers is an important step for improving safety around the home.

Driving

When you feel it's no longer safe for your loved one to operate a vehicle, and they insist they are fine, that creates a difficult situation. The loss of independence that comes from not being able to drive can be devastating. And yet you may need to insist that your aging loved one should stop driving – for their safety as well as the safety of others. Geriatric Psychiatrist Dr. Thomas Weiss offers some advice on how to tackle this difficult situation with real-life examples in the video below:

Medication

Medication management is a critical public health concern. Caregivers play a vital role in helping seniors stay healthy by familiarizing themselves with the following five potentially deadly medication mistakes:

1. Ignoring Dosing Requirements

Overdoses are a leading cause of medication fatalities. And although prescription drugs are the most common offenders, it's also possible to overdose on over-the-counter medications. Seniors, in particular, are at risk of overdosing due to declines in memory.

New pill box technology is an effective way to ensure that seniors are taking their medications in the proper doses and at the proper times. Watch the video below and learn more about the many options available and how they can help manage medications safely.

['Managing Medications: A Review of the Latest Pill-Box Technology' Video](#)

Caregivers can also help by watching for signs and symptoms of overuse, such as prematurely running out of medication, mood swings, and over-sedation. If you do notice changes in thinking, feeling or appearance, check in with your aging loved one's doctor.

2. Polypharmacy and Drug Interactions

Not only do most seniors take multiple medications, but many of them are prescribed by different specialists. While each of these prescriptions are likely to be safe when taken on their own, when combined they can lead to unexpected and dangerous drug interactions. Without proper monitoring, a physician may unknowingly add a potentially dangerous medication to the list.

Caregivers can help avoid this problem by maintaining a comprehensive list of all medications and sharing it with a "gatekeeper" healthcare professional whenever a new medication is prescribed. Pharmacists can also play a vital role in catching potential drug interaction issues.

3. Mixing Up Medications

In addition to taking too many medications and/or medications that shouldn't be taken together, many seniors are also taking the wrong medications entirely. This can be caused by similarities in names as well as in appearance.

Sorting medication in advance can help lessen any confusion. Additionally, storing as-needed medications separately can reduce the risk of errors by patients, caregivers and pharmacists alike.

Lastly, the mere act of understanding the purpose of each new medication can help caregivers identify if multiple medications have been prescribed to treat the same condition.

4. Food Interactions

While the dangers of drug interactions may be relatively well known, fewer people are aware that combining certain foods with certain drugs can also lead to life-threatening

outcomes. Some foods may render certain drugs ineffective. Others may alter the way a drug metabolizes in the body.

Thoroughly reading medication labels and following directions can help avoid food and drug interactions. Additionally, listening to your loved one's doctor and/or consulting with a pharmacist can help prevent avoidable errors.

5. Wrong-Route Errors

In many cases, how a medication is taken is just as important as the dosing or possible interactions. Unfortunately, the administration of medications via a different route than prescribed can lead to adverse patient outcomes, including death. This can include everything from swallowing a pill meant to be absorbed under the tongue or injecting a liquid intended for use as a nasal spray.

Five More Common Medication Errors

The following bit of information could be summed up by reiterating the importance of reading a medication's label, especially as it relates to "wrong-route errors," but in the interest of your loved one's safety, it's worth repeating in greater detail.

1. Failure to follow instructions regarding food, fluids, antacids and ENFs

Many prescription medications require that patients take medication with a certain amount of liquid, with or without food, or after taking an antacid. The medication may not work or may cause harm to the patient if the instructions aren't followed. Additionally, some medications are prescribed to be taken with enteral nutritional formulas (ENFs). Failure to follow standard protocols for administering medications with ENFs can also lead to injury.

2. Failure to follow "do not crush" instructions

While it may be easier in the moment to administer medication capsules, tablets and pills by crushing or slicing them, this can impact their effectiveness. Resist splitting medication with "do not crush" on the label.

3. Failure to properly mix medication

Some medications require shaking, "rolling," or mixing prior to being administered. This is an important part of ensuring that patients receive the proper amount of medication. For example, air bubbles in insulin suspensions can displace the medicine and interfere

with the patient receiving the correct dosage. Caregivers can avoid this situation by following instructions for proper preparation of medication prior to administration.

4. Inadequate administration of eye drops and metered dose inhalers (MDIs)

Eye drops must remain in contact with the patient's eye for a certain amount of time in order to ensure adequate absorption prior to subsequent eye drops. The same applies to MDIs, which require proper shaking, positioning and waiting times between puffs. Again, reading the instructions and precisely following them can prevent medication errors.

5. Failure to enforce sublingual drug delivery

Swallowing a pill can have a very different result than sublingual delivery (a type of lozenge that is dissolved underneath the tongue). If a patient is repeatedly swallowing sublingual tablets, talk to his/her physician about prescribing a different type of medication.

Depression

You may have heard warnings that suicides among seniors rise during the holiday season. However, this is a widely perpetuated myth, according to the Centers for Disease Control, based on data from the Annenberg Public Policy Center. In fact, suicide rates are actually at their lowest in December, but they do peak afterward – a phenomenon that some experts attribute to a letdown from the holidays.

The Takeaway for Caregivers

The post-holiday months are the perfect time to check in on the mental health of aging loved ones. Here's a closer look at the issue of senior depression, along with caregiver tips for safeguarding the emotional wellness of older adults.

About Seniors and Depression

According to data shared by Mental Health America, more than two million American seniors suffer from some form of depression. Not only can symptoms of depression be triggered by the onset of late-in-life chronic illnesses, they can be exacerbated by the death of a loved one. For example, a full third of seniors meet the criteria for depression a month after a spouse's death, with half remaining clinically depressed a full year later.

Depression is a major predictor of suicide in older adults, who make up 20 percent of the country's total suicide deaths. White males over the age of 85 are particularly vulnerable – with suicide rates nearly six times higher than the general suicide rate.

How Caregivers Can Help

Unfortunately, senior mental health often falls through the cracks when it comes to clinical care. This problem has several causes, including the fact that seniors are more likely than any other demographic to believe they can "handle it themselves." As a result, not only are older adults less likely than younger people to mention their symptoms, but they're also more likely to view depression as a "normal" part of the aging process.

Given the previously cited statistics, it is alarming that fewer than three percent of seniors are treated by mental health professionals. Perhaps more alarming: Primary care doctors accurately recognize less than 50 percent of depression in patients.



Caregivers can play a vital role in identifying mental health issues in seniors.

Because of this, caregivers can play a vital role in identifying mental health issues in seniors, as well as in helping them get the help they need. According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), sadness is not always the primary symptom of depression in older adults. Others signs of depression may include:

- Anxiety or feelings of emptiness
- Loss of interest in activities and hobbies
- Feelings of pessimism, hopelessness, helplessness, worthlessness and guilt

- Increased fatigue and decreased energy
- Trouble concentrating and making decisions
- Sleep changes, including difficulty sleeping and oversleeping
- Appetite and weight changes
- Irritability and restlessness
- Thoughts of death and suicide
- Aches, pains, and digestion issues with no clear cause and that don't respond to treatment

Symptoms persisting for more than two weeks should be addressed with your loved one's healthcare provider.

The good news is clinical depression is very treatable. More than 80 percent of people are receptive to medication, psychotherapy, or a combination of the two, [according to the NIH](#). Caregivers can help ensure that seniors get the mental health care they need by keeping watch for symptoms – not just during the holidays but throughout the year.

Scams

This threat is difficult to address because scams are constantly changing, with newer, more complex and increasingly effective scams popping up every day. Seniors aren't the only ones prone to fall for scams, but they are specifically targeted. The loss of retirement savings can be devastating for the entire family. Having a conversation about the following scams, even in passing, can be incredibly helpful in preventing your loved ones from being affected.

Below is a list and basic explanation of the five most common scams that affect seniors. Please bear in mind that this is by no means a complete list. As always, if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

1. Tax Phone Scam

Let it be said that the IRS will never call to inform a taxpayer that they owe money or back taxes. Threats of arrest and warrants for arrest commonly accompany this scam to inflict maximum fear and compliance with the scammer's ultimate demand: Give me your money.

2. You've Won!

Amazingly, your loved one receives a call to let them know that their name has been selected to receive a wonderfully outlandish prize. Money, trips, cars are theirs if they call the provided number to claim the prize. Sadly, there's no prize waiting to be claimed, just a scammer attempting to steal personal information, bank account numbers, social security numbers and whatever else they can get a victim to divulge.

3. Tech Support Scam

Typically this happens as a pop-up when going to a website that has been hacked by would-be scammers. The pop-up usually claims the computer has been infected with a virus or is in need of a specific service. As luck would have it, there's also a handy "fix my problem" now button on this pop-up that will get all the needed help for a small fee. The much larger and more dubious fee comes in the potential stealing of passwords, logins, and any other personal information provided. There is alternatively a phone version of this scam, where the caller says that they're with Microsoft tech support and that your loved one's computer has been generating errors on the server for weeks. The goal is the same, and hanging up immediately is the best option.

4. Foreign Lottery Scam

One of the oldest standing scams, this one involves a phone call letting your loved one know that they've won a sizeable foreign lottery. The only thing needed to claim the prize is paying the taxes in advance – typically by wiring money through Western Union. This is a guaranteed scam. Save the headache, and have your loved one just hang up.

5. Medicare Calls

When receiving a call to confirm and update Medicare information, just know that this is a scam. What they're after is the Medicare number. Or more specifically, they're after your loved one's social security number, which is the Medicare number with an additional letter and a number. This is not information you want in the wrong hands. Actual Medicare calls would never ask for this information because they already know it.