



National
PACE
Association

Does My Aging Loved One Need Assistance?

Today's families are busier and more geographically diverse than ever. For many, returning home for the holidays may be the only chance they get to spend extended, quality time with an aging loved one. Often the physical and cognitive changes that occur in the ensuing period can be quite significant and reason for concern. Other times, the changes may be slight, but they are no less significant to the well being of a loved one.

To help families who may be concerned about the mental or physical decline of an older loved one determine if a formal geriatric assessment needs to be done, the National PACE Association has prepared the following set of questions and observations that families can use. These will not provide a formal assessment; rather they will help families begin to address these issues and spur discussion about getting professional assistance.

Five Observations and Subsequent Questions to Consider:

- **Overall Appearance:** As someone who is seeing a loved one for the first time in many months, you may have a perspective on gradual changes that others do not. Take the opportunity to observe their outward appearance and to inquire about other areas of their day to day lives. Ask yourself:
 - Has there been noticeable weight loss?
 - Do they dress appropriately for the time of day and in clean clothes?
 - Is their home clean?
- **Physical Health:** Assessing the physical health of a senior is often difficult because they may have one or more chronic conditions such as high blood pressure or diabetes that are not easily noticed, but there are telltale signs that you need to watch for that may suggest a condition exists or is not being managed well. Questions to consider include:
 - Do they have vision or hearing problems?
 - Do they have issues with walking and balance?
 - Do they have problems with incontinence or toileting?
 - Have they been hospitalized or visited the emergency room recently?
 - Do they complain of chronic pain?
- **Mental State:** Being cognizant of changes in a loved one's mental state is as important as noticing their outward appearance or physical health. However, because there is significant commonality with physical issues oftentimes only a trained professional is able to notice important yet more subtle signs. In spending time with a senior consider:
 - Are they showing signs of confusion, being disoriented or forgetfulness?
 - Have they become isolated?

- Are they having trouble sleeping?

Depression in the elderly is a widespread problem that is often not diagnosed and frequently undertreated. Many older people will not admit to the signs and symptoms of depression while others may be aware of their depression, but believe that nothing can be done about.

Signs to look for include:

- Abnormal thoughts about death;
 - Change in appetite (usually a loss of appetite);
 - Unintentional weight loss (most common);
 - Despondent or increasingly irritable;
 - Fatigue (tiredness or weariness);
 - Loss of interest or pleasure in daily activities;
 - Trouble sleeping.
- **Nutrition:** Sound nutrition continues to be important throughout the aging process. In many instances the way in which seniors approach their nutritional needs overlaps with other important areas including Physical Health, Mental State, and Social Life. Observations to consider:
 - Are they eating regularly?
 - Do they eat balanced meals?
 - Can they get to a grocery store?
 - Are they able to prepare meals or do they need assistance?
 - **Social Activity:** The ability of seniors to engage with others and participate in the instrumental activities of daily living is important to allowing them live independently. There is often an overlap between these areas and others like Physical Health and Mental State. Issues to consider include:
 - Do they see or talk with friends frequently?
 - Are they engaged in social activities or hobbies?
 - Do they go to church or a community center regularly?
 - Can they still drive safely?

Finding a Geriatric Assessment: A natural place to inquire about a geriatric assessment is with your loved one's primary care physician. Other sources for referrals include:

- A local Area Agency on Aging (call 1-800-677-1116 for the AAA in your area)
- Local hospitals, PACE programs, and health maintenance organizations
- Senior or family service organizations
- Senior centers
- Religious affiliations including churches and synagogues
- Medicaid offices
- Private care management companies
- Eldercare Locator: Call 1-800-677-1116

If you are interested in finding out if there is a Program of All-inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE) near you or a loved one, please visit www.PACE4You.org