

# Improve Their Quality of Life



Older Americans and their caregivers sometimes fall victim to myths that become self-fulfilling prophecies. One 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, and, 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 we are younger. It includes:

- **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.
- **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.
- **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 you how to do range of motion, stretching and strengthening exercises. Over time, these exercises can help to increase strength and mobility.

- **Monitoring, in consultation with your relative's primary care physician and pharmacist, both over the counter 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.
- **Staying involved with family and friends.**
- **Taking part in community activities, such as going to senior center activities.**
- **Keeping an active mind with activities ranging from reading to card and board games as well as using a computer.**

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# Improve Their Quality of Life *(continued)*

- **Learning about assistive devices that can enhance your older relative or friend's independence and safety.**
- **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, check their qualifications. What is their academic background and experience? Are they board certified in their practice area? You may want to accompany your older relative or friend to the appointment and take notes. This helps to insure 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 relative.

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

One note of caution. If your relative 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.

## Additional Resources and Reading Lists

**NIHSeniorHealth.gov** has information on a variety of topics including diet, exercise and consumer protection. It is a federal "portal" site and has links to all federal government websites with information for seniors.

