

How Do I Know if an Aging Friend or Relative Needs Help?

When caring for an aging friend or relative from afar, it can be hard to know when your help is needed. Sometimes, your relative will ask for help. Or, the sudden start of a severe illness will make it clear that assistance is needed. But, when you live far away, the National Institute on Aging says some detective work might be necessary to uncover possible signs that support or help is needed.

A phone call is not always the best way to tell whether or not an older person needs help handling daily activities. The person may not want to worry you or may be embarrassed to admit that he or she cannot handle certain daily activities.

With the person's permission, you could contact people who see the person regularly – neighbors, friends, doctors, or local relatives, for example, and ask them to call you with any concerns. You might also ask if you can check in with them periodically.

When you visit, look around for possible trouble areas, it's easier to disguise problems during a short phone call than during a longer visit. Make a list of trouble spots you want to check on, then if you can't fix everything during your visit, see if you can arrange for someone else to finish up.

In addition to safety issues and the overall condition of the home, try to determine the older person's mood and general health status. Sometimes people confuse depression in older people with normal aging. A depressed older person might brighten up for a phone call or short visit, but it's harder to hide serious mood problems during an extended visit.