

A Checklist: 43 Signs Your Senior May Be Ready for Further Care

The decision to help your senior move out of their current living situation is a complex one, both practically and emotionally. Above all, you want your loved one to be safe, but may be unsure if they should continue to live alone. Although every situation is different, you can gain confidence in your decision by looking for clues around their home. Consider the following signs noted in this valuable checklist that will provide you with useful information to help make the decision:

Big-Picture Signs

Keep the big “red flags” in mind. Certain situations make it more obvious that it’s wise to start thinking about alternate living arrangements. Look for:

1. **Recent accidents or close calls.** Has your senior taken a fall, had a medical scare, or get in a fender bender (or worse)? Who responded and how long did it take? Accidents do happen, but as people get older, the odds rise of them happening again.
2. **A slow recovery.** How did the person weather the most recent illness (for example, a flu or bad cold)? Was he or she able and willing to seek medical care when needed, or did last winter’s cold develop into untreated bronchitis?
3. **A chronic health condition that’s worsening.** Progressive problems such as COPD, dementia and congestive heart failure can decline gradually or precipitously, but either way, their presence means your loved one will increasingly need help.
4. **Increasing difficulty managing the activities of daily living (ADLs) and instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs).** ADLs and IADLs are the skills needed to live independently — dressing, shopping, cooking, doing laundry, managing medications and so on. Doctors, social workers and other geriatric experts evaluate them as part of a functional assessment, which is one way to get an expert’s view of the situation. Difficulties with ADLs and IADLs can be remedied by bringing in more in-home help, or a move to nursing care.

Up-Close Signs

Give your loved one a big hug. Clues aren't always visible from a distance. When you don't see the person every day, you might learn more through touch. Look for:

5. **Noticeable weight loss.** Does the person look or feel thinner? Are clothes loose or have they added notches to their belt? Many conditions, ranging from depression to cancer, can cause weight loss. A person who is having trouble getting out to shop or remembering how to cook (or to eat) can lose weight. Be sure to check the fridge, and watch meal-prep skills.
6. **Noticeable weight gain.** Common causes include an injury slowing the person down, diabetes and dementia (when someone doesn't remember eating, he or she may indulge in meals and snacks all day long). Someone with money troubles may choose fewer fresh foods and more packaged goods or dried pasta and bread.
7. **Appearing to be more frail.** Do you feel anything "different" about the person's strength and stature when you hug? Can your loved one rise easily from a chair? Does she or he seem unsteady or unable to balance? Compare these observations to the last time you were together.
8. **Strange body odor.** Unfortunately, a close hug can also reveal changes in personal hygiene habits. Causes range from memory trouble to depression to other physical ailments.
9. **Changes in appearance.** Does the person's hair and makeup look all right? Are clothes clean? Someone known for crisply ironed shirts who's now in a stained sweatshirt may lack the dexterity for buttons or may have lost the strength for managing an ironing board and iron. A formerly clean-shaven man with an unkempt beard may be forgetting to shave (or forgetting how to shave).

Social Signs

Think realistically about the person's social connections. Social circles tend to shrink with age, which can have health and safety implications. Look for:

10. **Signs of active friendships.** Does your loved one still get together for lunches or outings with friends or visits with neighbors or participate in religious activities or other group events? Does he or she talk about others or keep a calendar of appointments? Lack of companionship is associated with depression and heart problems in older adults. If friends have died or moved away, moving to a place where other people are around could be lifesaving.

11. **Signs that your loved one has cut back on activities and interests.** Is a hobby area abandoned? Has a club membership been given up? A library card gone unused? There are many reasons people cut back, but dropping out of everything and showing interest in almost nothing is a red flag for depression.
12. **Days spent without leaving the house (isolation).** This sometimes happens because the person can no longer drive or is afraid to take public transportation alone and lacks a companion to come along. While many older adults fear being “locked away” in a retirement home, many such facilities offer regular outings that may keep them more mobile and active, not less.
13. **Someone who checks in on a regular basis.** If not you or another family member, who does this? Is your loved one willing to consider a home-safety alarm system, a personal alarm system or a daily calling service?

Money Signs

Glance through the mail. Your loved one’s mail can offer an often-overlooked clue to how he or she is managing money, a common early warning sign of cognitive trouble. Look for:

14. **“Snowdrifts” of mail in various places.** Finding lots of mail scattered around raises concern about how bills, insurance and other matters are being managed. (Piles of mail are also a potential tripping hazard.)
15. **Unopened personal mail.** Everybody skips junk mail, but few of us can ignore a good old-fashioned, hand-addressed letter.
16. **Unopened bills.** This can indicate that your loved one is having difficulty managing finances — one of the most common first signs of dementia.
17. **Letters from banks, creditors or insurers.** Routine business letters aren’t worrisome. But it’s alarming if letters are referring to overdue payments, overdrawn balances, recent accidents or other concerning events.
18. **Thank-you messages from charities.** Older adults are often vulnerable to scammers. Even those who have always been fiscally prudent are vulnerable if they’re having trouble with thinking skills (a common sign of Alzheimer’s disease). Some so-called charities are bogus; other legitimate charities hit up givers over and over, and your loved one may not remember having donating the first time.
19. **Lots of crisp, unread magazines.** The person may unknowingly have repeat-renewal subscriptions he or she doesn’t need.

Driving Signs

Take a drive — with your loved one behind the wheel, if he or she is still driving. Living independently in our culture often depends on the ability to drive, or the arrangement of alternate transportation options. Look for:

20. **Nicks or dents on the car.** Notice the car body as you get in and out. Damage marks can be signs of careless or poor driving.
21. **Fastening his or her seatbelt.** Even people with mild dementia usually follow the rote basics of driving. It's worrisome if he or she is forgetting this step.
22. **Tension, preoccupation or being easily distracted.** The person may be unwilling to engage in conversation while driving. He or she may avoid certain routes, highway driving, or driving at night and in rain — a safe kind of self-policing but also signals of changing ability.
23. **Signs of dangerous driving.** People whose driving ability is impaired are more likely to tailgate, drift from their lane, go below the speed limit, react slowly to lights or other cars and mix up gas and brake pedals.
24. **Warning lights.** Check out the dashboard as you ride along. Does the car have sufficient oil, gas, coolant, and windshield-wiper fluid?

Kitchen Signs

Go through the kitchen, from fridge to cupboards to oven. Because people spend so much time in this room, you can learn a lot. Look for:

25. **Stale or expired foods.** We all buy more than we need. Look for signs that food is not only old but that this is unnoticed — for example, mold, sour milk that's still used or expiration dates well past due.
26. **Multiples of the same item.** Ten bottles of ketchup? More cereal than can be eaten in a year? Multiples often reveal that the shopper can't remember from one store trip to the next what's in stock at home.
27. **A freezer full of TV dinners.** They might have been bought for convenience, but frozen dinners tend not to make for a healthy diet. If there's not much fresh food in the house (because it's too hard to for the person to procure or cook), your loved one might be ready to have help with meal prep or delivery services.
28. **Broken appliances.** Check them all: microwave, coffeemaker, toaster, washer, and dryer — any device you know your loved one uses (or used to use) routinely.

29. **Signs of fire.** Look for charred stove knobs, badly singed pot bottoms (even thrown out?), or potholders with burned edges? Also look for a discharged fire extinguisher, smoke detectors that have been disassembled, or boxes of baking soda near the stove. Accidents happen; ask for the story behind what you see. Accidental fires are a common home danger for older adults.
30. **Increased use of takeout or simpler cooking.** A change in physical or mental abilities might explain a downshift to simpler recipes or food choices.

Around-the-House Signs

Look around the living areas. Sometimes the most obvious sign is hard to see because we become so used to it. Look for:

31. **Lots of clutter.** An inability to throw anything away may be a sign of a neurological or physical issue. Obviously it's more worrisome in a neatnik than in a chronic slob. Papers or pet toys all over the floor represent a tripping hazard.
32. **Signs of lax housekeeping.** Spills that haven't been cleaned up are a common sign of dementia — the person lacks the follow-through to tidy. Keep an eye out for cobwebs, bathroom mold, thick dust or other signs of slackness. Physical limitations can mean your loved one needs housekeeping help or a living situation where this is taken care of for him or her.
33. **Bathroom grime.** A common scenario: Your loved one makes an effort to tidy up living areas but overlooks the bathroom. Or the guest bath is clean, but not the one the person uses all the time (the one off a bedroom, for example). Here you may see a truer picture of how your loved one is keeping up.

Pet-Care and Plant-Care Signs

Be sure to check out how the other living things in the home are faring. An ability to take care of pets and plants goes along with self-care. Look for:

34. **Plants that are dying, dead, or just absent.** Most of us have seen plants go brown sometimes. Keep an eye out for chronic neglect, especially in a former plant-lover's home.
35. **Animals that don't seem well tended.** Common problems: dogs with long nails, cat litter boxes that haven't been changed lately or dead fish in the fish tank. Poor pet grooming, overfeeding and underfeeding are other red flags.

Home-Maintenance Signs

Walk around the yard. Yard maintenance — or lack of it — can yield clues that your loved one isn't faring as well at home alone anymore. Look for:

36. **Signs of neglect.** Look for discolored siding or ceilings that might indicate a leak, gutters choked with leaves, broken windows or fences and dirty windows.
37. **Newspapers in the bushes.** Are papers being delivered but ignored? Sometimes people pick up those they can see on a driveway, but not ones that go off into the yard.
38. **Mail piled up in the mailbox.** Go out and check — it's an indication that your loved one doesn't even retrieve it regularly.

Signs from Friends and Others

Get the input of others who know your loved one in order to collect a fuller picture of reality. Gently probing about what others think isn't nosy; you're being loving, concerned, and proactive. Look for:

39. **Input from those in your loved one's circle.** Talk to old friends and close relatives to get their sense of how the person is faring. Listen for stories that hint that the person doesn't get out much ("She doesn't come over anymore." "She quit book club."). Pay attention to comments that indicate ongoing concerns ("Has he had that heart test yet?" "We were worried the day the ambulance came.").
40. **Medical insight.** With appropriate permission, your loved one's primary doctor may share your concerns about his or her patient's safety at home — or may be able to alleviate those concerns or suggest where to get a home assessment.
41. **A second opinion.** A social worker or professional geriatric care manager visits older adults' homes and does informal evaluations. While your loved one may initially resist the notion of a "total stranger" checking on them, try pitching it as a professional (and neutral) second opinion, or ask the doctor to "prescribe" it. Some people wind up sharing doubts or vulnerabilities with a sympathetic, experienced stranger that they're loathe to admit to their own children or family.

Caregivers' Signs

Finally, realize that some of the information you collect is intangible —it has to do with feelings and emotions, and the stress levels of everyone involved. Look for:

42. **How you're doing.** While this decision to remain in the home is not primarily about you — the son, daughter, grandchild, caregiver — your own exhaustion can be a good gauge of a decline in older adults' ability to care for themselves. Keeping someone at home can require lots of hands-on support or care coordination, and this is time-consuming. If your loved one's need for care is just plain wearing you out or if a spouse or children are feeling the collective strain of your caregiving activities, these are major signs that it's time to start looking at other options.
43. **Your loved one's emotional state.** Safety is crucial, of course, but so is emotional well-being. If someone living alone is riddled with anxieties or increasingly lonely, then that may tip the scales toward a move not solely based on health and safety reasons. If your loved one has a full life, a close neighborhood and community connections and seems to be thriving, it's worth exploring as many in-home care options as possible before raising stress levels by pressing a move from a beloved home. If, on the other hand, your loved one is showing signs that living alone is a strain, it may be time for a talk. Introduce the subject of where to live in a neutral way, and you may find that your loved one harbors the same fears for current and future safety and security that you do. Find out what your loved one fears most about moving and/or staying at home before launching into your own worries, and what you think ought to be done.



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Senior Safety Checklist

	Task	Notes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Big picture signs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Recent accidents or close callsSlow recoveryChronic health conditionDifficulty managing ADLS/IADLS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Up-close signs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Weight lossWeight gainAppearing frailBody odorAppearance	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/><input type="checkbox"/>	<p>Social Signs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">Active friendshipsActivities and interestsIsolationRegular check-insDisaster planning	

Money Signs

- Scattered mail
- Unopened mail
- Unopened bills
- Letters from banks, creditors, insurers
- Charity thank-you messages
- Unread magazines

Driving Signs

- Nicks/Dents on car
- Seatbelt
- Tension, preoccupation, distraction
- Impaired driving
- Dashboard lights

Kitchen Signs

- Expired food
- Multiple items
- TV dinners
- Broken appliances
- Signs of fire
- Takeout or simpler meals

Around the House Signs

- Clutter
 - Lax housekeeping
 - Bathroom grime
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Pet-care and Plant-care Signs

- Plants dead, dying, absent**
- Poor grooming, over/under-feeding**

Home-maintenance Signs

- Property neglect**
- Stray newspapers**
- Mail in mailbox**

Personal and Professional Signs

- Friends' input**
- Medical insights**
- Professional opinions**

Caregivers' signs

- Your own well-being**
 - Your senior's emotional state**
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