

If caring for an elderly person is new for you ---

Sons and daughters often provide care for an elderly parent, grandparent or relative. For some, it's a first-time experience with the "world" of aging.

The purpose of this section is to help the "younger" caregiver understand (in general terms) the changes their elderly love-ones cope with as they grow older. Some changes are "normal." Others are not. Knowing the difference may provide the younger caregiver with a valuable point of reference.

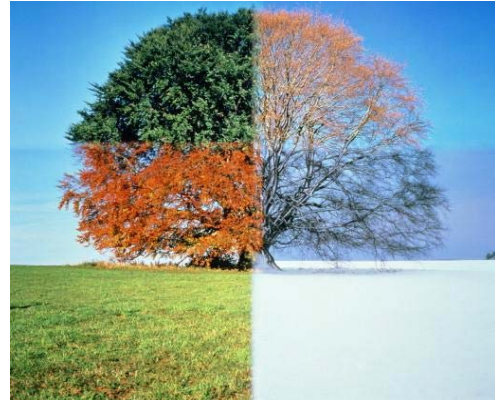
Below are examples of "normal" changes related to aging. Caregivers can play an important role in helping their loved-one cope and adapt to the changes:

- **Vision** tends to worsen; people get more far-sighted, and their eyes are less able to adjust to changes in light conditions. This may result in problems with glare and difficulties with driving at night.
- **Hearing** becomes less acute, especially at higher frequencies. This may cause difficulties in hearing conversation.
- **Sense of taste** diminishes, sometimes causing food to taste bland. The sense of smell is also reduced. These sensory changes can lead to a decreased interest in food.
- Changes in **sleep patterns** are common; seniors may not sleep as soundly, taking longer to fall asleep, and awakening more often at night. They may also wake up very early in the morning. These changes can be disturbing to older people, who then sometimes try sleeping medications, which can be dangerous.
- **Digestion** slows, due to tissue and muscular changes. This may result in constipation.
- **Bones** often become thinner, and cartilage tissue changes, sometimes leading to restricted movement, stooped posture, and increased risk of fractures. Joints tend to be stiffer.
- The ability to regulate **body temperature** declines, especially in the arms and legs. This may result in overheating, when a person wears too many layers on a hot day.
- **Skin** is more fragile, and the layer of fat under the skin is thinner. The skin surface is less sensitive to touch, so damage may not be noticed until there is a serious problem.
- **Sense of balance** may change. Many seniors experience dizziness with sudden changes in body position.
- While some very **minor memory changes** occur with normal aging, there should be no significant mental decline with age.



Below are examples of changes that are not normal. Should a caregiver see any of these changes they should raise concerns; some may demand immediate attention by the caregiver or even a health professional:

- Unexplained weight loss or gain
- Unexplained bruises or other signs of injury
- Difficulty walking or walking more slowly
- Improper or incomplete dressing; wears the same clothes most of the time; clothes do not smell clean
- Lack of attention to personal hygiene; incontinence and /or more frequent trips to the bathroom
- Complaints of changes in taste and smell
- Laundry piling up
- Garbage piling up
- House very messy / cluttered or in disrepair.
- Overdue bills, unopened mail piling up
- Cigarette burns on the furniture
- Blackened pots (stove / cooking problems)
- Refrigerator too full
- Spoiled items are mixed with fresh foods
- Eating habits changed markedly or evidence of improper eating habits
- Unusual behaviors (e.g. not telling you things, becoming anti-social or reclusive, agitated or aggressive behavior)
- Signs of becoming more forgetful or confused; asking repetitious questions
- Getting lost while walking or out driving
- Loss of a sense of time
- Change in sleep patterns - either more or less than previously
- Lost interest in previously enjoyable activities
- Swollen feet or legs
- Shortness of breath or frequent coughing
- Is irritable, cries frequently, or has unusual changes in mood
- Is more withdrawn or is reluctant to leave the house
- Is increasingly secretive or suspicious of others
- Expresses feelings of hopelessness or not wanting to live



Often these problems are caused by treatable medical conditions. Contact your medical provider to get an evaluation or call the Care Crisis Line at 425-258-4357 or 1-800-584-3578.

This information speaks in generalities. The overall message is: pay attention. Yogi Berra once said: "You can see a lot by just looking." As you spend more time with your aging loved-one, you will learn about the special ways they are aging and how you can best support the quality of their life.