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Family Caregiver Resources

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Independence: Staying mobile on your feet

"What walks on four legs in the morning, two legs at noon, and three in the evening?"

This classic Greek riddle of the Sphinx acknowledges that in the human life cycle walking on two legs is challenging in the beginning and end. In fact, more than one in four adults over 65 report trouble getting around. Falls are more frequent as we age. And they have stiff physical, psychological and social consequences. You can help your loved one maintain their independence by supporting them to stay active, even "just" walking.

Start a safe walking routine



Walking for exercise is recommended for every phase of life! Walking is the easiest physical activity to engage in, and it brings multiple benefits. The ability to get around readily is often the deciding factor in whether an older adult can stay living at home.

Many older adults are hesitant to walk much. If you

sense resistance, ask your loved one about concerns. He or she may be afraid of falling, or of the neighborhood. Other common obstacles include foot problems, uncomfortable shoes, depression, or poor eyesight.

Begin by getting the doctor's approval. Getting the thumbs up from the doctor may help your relative get going. Even short 10-minute walks are beneficial.

Review safe walking practices:

- **What to bring.** Dress in layers. Wear loose-fitting, comfortable clothes. Choose flexible shoes that fit well and provide a nonslip sole. Carry a cell phone or other device for emergency help. Bring water. And bring any usual walking aids, such as a cane or walker, properly fitted to your relative's size.
- **Where to walk.** When weather permits, walk outdoors. Choose smooth-surfaced, well-lit, and low-traffic locations. This might be a walking path in the neighborhood or a nearby school or park. In bad weather or overly hot weather, try a shopping mall.
- **How to walk.** Focus on deep breathing and good posture. The goal is natural, even strides with arms swinging easily. Eventually the pace should be brisk enough to raise the heart rate yet permit conversation. But in the beginning, you want it to be easy and fun so it will become an enjoyable habit.

Ideally, see if your loved one can find a walking buddy or walking group. Especially for people who are not used to exercise, it's more fun when it's part of a social activity.



"Mom's been hesitant after her fall. I'm doing what I can to encourage her to walk so she can continue to live on her own."

[YOUR PHONE]

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When Dad resists a walker



For many older adults, use of a walker carries great stigma. It's a symbol of disability and often of isolation. In actual fact, a walker can be the key to staying actively engaged with favorite activities.

The benefits of a walker

- It can bear up to 50% of a person's weight. (A cane holds only 25%.)
- It supports good posture. A walker keeps a person upright by reinforcing both sides of the body. (A cane steadies only one side.)
- It is designed for people with moderate to severe balance problems or those with generalized weakness and arthritis. (A cane is best for only minor balance problems or injuries.)
- It may act as a chair when needed. Many walkers with wheels have a bench. Great for "standing" in line or when your loved one is suddenly tired or dizzy.
- It can be rather stylish, with modern accessories, such as a smartphone clamp, a coffee cup holder and a basket for carrying things.
- It stays where you put it! Canes seem to have a mind of their own, scooting out of reach when you least expect it.

If you have had the "walker talk" with no success, make an appointment with the doctor and directly ask, "What's your experience with patients who fall? How careful should we be?"

Also get the doctor's input about the type of walker that is best for your loved one. Perhaps he or she will do a mobility assessment. Or make a referral to a physical or occupational therapist to create a plan for safe walking.

Empathize with Dad's frustration that his body has given out on him in this way. Remind him that with a walker, he can still get around on his own to do what he pleases. It's often the most effective choice for maintaining independence.

If Mom is afraid of falling again

Many older adults who have fallen believe it is best to "stay safe" and avoid falling again by restricting their activities. Unfortunately, that's the worst thing they can do! Inactivity is a path to reduced strength and mobility, which *increases* the risk of a fall and injury.

One of the most important things you can do is encourage your worried relative to stay up and moving. Here are some tips:

Talk about the fear

Although you don't want to push, it's important to talk with your relative about the risks of inactivity. This can pave the way to a discussion of how to work with his or her understandable fear. Putting things in terms of your own concerns may be helpful. It sounds less blaming or demanding. For example:

"I'm concerned, Mom, that the fall you took in December has made you extra fearful. For sure, no one would want to go through that again! But I've done some reading and learned that being inactive actually makes you more likely to fall a second time. What can we do to build your strength and confidence?"

Offer strategies for change

Suggest ways that you can help your relative overcome his or her fear.

- *"Let's talk with your doctor about what's worked for other patients in this situation."*
- *"Let's practice balance exercises together. Take a few laps down the hall. I'll be here so you don't have to worry."*
- *"Let's ask for a referral to a physical therapist. They can give you tips about walking, how to better catch yourself, and how to get up safely if you did fall again."*
- *"Let's take stock of what's different now than when you fell. You were sick then." (Or, "You're no longer on that medication that made you dizzy.")*

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