

Ask *the* Expert

Important Facts about Your Parent's Health Care

How often should my parents see their primary care doctor (PCP)?

The frequency of medical visits depends on your parent's overall health, medical history, and their medications. Several common health conditions and the medications used to treat them require frequent monitoring of physical signs and symptoms while others may only need monitoring one to two times a year. You should check with your parent's PCP to find the optimal interval for medical visits.

How can I obtain information about my parent's medical care?

Privacy laws (also known as HIPAA laws) restrict who can gain access to an individual's medical information. To ensure privacy, information is restricted to the patient, their health care providers for the purpose of providing continuous care, and insurance companies for the purpose of payment. Additionally, an individual may designate other people with whom their health care information may be shared. Encourage your parents to include you in the

list of people with whom physicians can discuss their medical care. This will allow you to obtain health care information about your parents in the event that they (or you) have questions or concerns. Reassure your parents that you intend to use this information to keep them safe and as healthy as possible, but be careful to allow and encourage them to maintain their autonomy in making decisions as long as they are able to do so.

How can I keep track of the medications my parents are taking?

First, it is important that every health care provider your parents see is aware of all of the medications they take, including over the counter medications, vitamins and herbal supplements. It is a good idea to take all medications (in their original bottles) to every medical appointment so that what your parents are actually taking can be matched against their provider's list. This can help minimize the use of unnecessary or duplicate medications and reduce medical errors.

At the end of a clinic visit, don't hesitate to ask the health care provider or their staff for an updated list of your parent's medications. The clinic staff can also write

down the reason for each medication. Encourage your parents to keep a copy of the medication lists in their wallets as this is very useful in the event of an emergency. It may also be helpful for you to keep a copy of those medication lists with you as well.

Finally, work with your parents to establish a system for administering medications. An easy and inexpensive way to do this is with a medication pill box. Set a time weekly for your parents to fill their boxes and encourage them to let you be a part of this process. This will allow both of you to keep an eye on medication usage, identify new medications, and know when refills are needed. A pill box system can also help prevent omitting medications or taking medications more than intended.

How can I talk to my parents about their health care wishes?

Talking with our loved ones about their wishes for how health care is provided in their later years may seem difficult, but it is an important conversation. It will allow you to be certain that you are honoring their wishes and making decisions as they would if they are unable to make those decisions themselves.

The key to these discussions is to have them while your parents are able to express their wishes (i.e. when they are healthier). The conversation should include understanding their feelings regarding life support measures such as:

- chest compressions, medications, and electrical current in an attempt to restart their heart

- mechanical ventilation (a tube is inserted into their lungs for the machine to breathe for them)

- artificial feeding methods (such as a feeding tube)

After the conversation takes place, it is a good idea to write down your parents' wishes either in the form of a living will or in their own words. A copy of this information should be kept by everyone involved so that it is easily available in the event it is needed. It is also a good idea to give a copy to your parents' physician.

Finally, since it is common (and normal) for people's views to change on these issues, it is a good idea to periodically readdress this topic with your parents. Be sure to update all documents, including the date, if changes are made.



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