

GUIDE · 7 MIN READ

12 signs an elderly parent can't live alone safely

Most families don't move because of one big event. They move because a dozen small things stack up. Here's what to watch for — and what to do before the crisis call.

01. Unexplained bruises or small injuries

Bumps on the shins, a graze on the forearm, a bruise on the hip — often dismissed as 'just being clumsy'. They're usually unreported falls. One fall doubles the risk of the next.

02. Weight loss or a much emptier fridge

Forgetting meals, struggling to cook, or losing interest in food. Look in the fridge and trash — expired food, the same grocery bag untouched, or living mainly on crackers and coffee.

03. Same clothes for days, or stains on familiar outfits

Bathing, dressing, and grooming are usually the first daily tasks to slip. It's rarely vanity — it's the effort of stairs to the bathroom, or fear of falling getting in and out of the shower.

04. Unopened mail, missed bills, scam letters on the table

Financial confusion is an early dementia sign and a major safety risk. Older adults are heavily targeted by phone, mail, and email scams; even competent parents lose tens of thousands quickly.

05. Burn marks on pans, scorch marks on the stove

Forgetting the burner is on is one of the most dangerous warning signs. Test smoke and CO alarms; many local fire departments offer a free home safety visit.

06. The house smells different

Stale, musty, or of urine. Often the first thing visiting family notices and the hardest to raise. It usually points to continence issues, mobility problems, or a struggle with cleaning.

07. Medication errors

Pills missed, doubled up, or found in odd places. A weekly pill organizer or pharmacy multi-dose blister pack solves most cases — but persistent errors need a medication review with the prescriber.

08. Withdrawing from friends, hobbies, or church

Social withdrawal is a red flag for depression, hearing loss, and early dementia. It also accelerates decline on its own — loneliness has roughly the same mortality impact as smoking.

09. Repeating questions or stories within minutes

Different from normal age-related forgetfulness. If they can't retain what you said five minutes ago, ask the primary care doctor for a cognitive assessment — early diagnosis opens doors to treatment and planning.

10. Getting lost on familiar routes

Driving home the long way, missing the turn for the store, or coming back from the corner shop hours late. Driving safety needs an honest conversation — and possibly a report to the state DMV.

11. Aggression, paranoia, or personality changes

Sudden suspicion ('the neighbors are stealing from me'), unusual anger, or someone gentle becoming sharp. Can be a UTI, medication side effect, or dementia — always worth a same-week doctor appointment.

12. You're getting more 3am phone calls

Confusion at night, anxiety, or repeated calls about small worries. Often the family's first real signal that the wheels are coming off — and the moment to act, not wait.

What to do next

1. Book a Medicare Annual Wellness Visit — ask specifically for a falls risk screen, medication review, and cognitive assessment.
2. Call the Eldercare Locator (1-800-677-1116) and request an in-home needs assessment from your Area Agency on Aging.
3. Apply for VA Aid & Attendance if your parent is a wartime veteran or surviving spouse — under-claimed and substantial.
4. Set up Durable Power of Attorney and a Health Care Proxy while they still have capacity to sign.
5. Look at [assisted-living and memory-care options](#) early — not because they need one now, but so you know what's out there.

Track the signs in one place

The Care Companion's red-flag tracker, daily observations, and doctor-prep summary turn 'I think mom's struggling' into a clear picture you can show the doctor. 7-day free trial, \$4.99/month after.

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General guidance for US family caregivers. For urgent concerns about a loved one's safety, contact their doctor or call 211 for community resources. In an emergency, call 911.

Free guide from The Care Companion — practical tools for families caring for someone with dementia. More guides at thecarecompanion.com/guides