

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Nutrition and Healthy Well-Being for Elders in Your Life

Many chronic conditions can be controlled and even prevented by simple lifestyle changes. Some elders may, however, be reluctant to change habits of a lifetime and may resist your attempts to encourage healthier choices. This can be extremely frustrating for the caregiver, particularly if lifetime habits are contributing to the onset of illness.

Try to be positive and patient with your older relative. Point out that healthier living doesn't necessarily have to involve sudden major changes. One slow step at a time is better than taking no steps at all. Discuss healthy living choices with your relative and share easy strategies to begin making changes.

Healthy Eating

Many elders don't want or need to eat quite as much as they did when they were younger. This reduced intake makes it even more important to ensure their diet provides all the required nutrients.

- Show your relative how to look for low-fat or low-sodium foods.
- Discuss easy ways to include high-fiber choices such as fruit, vegetables and whole grain foods.
- Encourage moderate alcohol and caffeine consumption.
- If an elder is suffering appetite loss, smaller and more frequent meals or snacks may be more acceptable.
- Ask your relative's healthcare provider if vitamin tablets are recommended.

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Exercise

Exercise has many benefits for every age group. It can increase energy, maintain weight, reduce stress, lower blood pressure and help to relieve depression. The right exercise can also help to prevent or slow the progress of osteoporosis and other conditions.

- Any individual unused to exercise, no matter what their age, should check with their doctor before beginning an exercise program.
- Remind your older relative that exercise can be enjoyable and doesn't have to follow a formal regime. Gardening, swimming, cycling or a brisk walk around the block are all excellent forms of exercise.
- Many shopping malls have walking programs, a perfect venue for year-round exercise—and a great way to meet people.
- Day programs for elders may offer supervised walking clubs.
- People in wheelchairs can exercise too. Ask your relative's healthcare provider for information on exercises for the disabled.
- Remind your relative not to exercise in extreme temperatures or during days with high pollution. Mall-walking is a great option.
- Encourage the older adult to drink plenty of water before, during and after exercise.

Maintaining Emotional Well-Being

Many elders begin to lose self-esteem and confidence as they come to grips with some of the physically restrictive aspects of aging, and face the loss of their independence. This can in turn lead to depression and social withdrawal, which can exacerbate the situation and leave the older adult more susceptible to physical illness.

Signs of depression can include sleep pattern changes, appetite loss, mental confusion and withdrawal. If you notice these signs, make sure your relative visits a healthcare provider. A complete assessment should be undertaken to rule out physiological problems. Medication and/or therapy may then be recommended to help alleviate the condition.

- Reinforce your relative's efforts to maintain independence in as many ways as possible. Make it clear that you’re there to offer support, not to interfere or impose your will.
- Encourage the elder to maintain social contacts. If transportation is preventing access, consider whether you or other family members may be able to drive your relative to social gatherings. If this is not practical, contact your community centre for information on volunteer transportation services.
- Share information with your relative about social centres that offer recreation programs of interest.
- Encourage the elder to exercise regularly, even if this is limited to a brisk walk around the block. Physical exercise can lift spirits and raise self-esteem.
- Share quality time with your relative. Reinforce their strengths and the things they are still able to do. Reminisce about the past, if this brings happy memories.

With age often comes a change of pace from a lifestyle that elders in your life were once accustomed to. Reinforcement of healthy eating and moderate exercise can help your relative to maintain a balanced lifestyle, no matter what their age. Be sure to consult with a healthcare professional before starting any new diet or fitness routine.