

There's No Place Like a Nursing Home *Here's how to avoid one*

By Ann Albert

Successful aging is more than just good luck. It takes some planning, as well as investment of your time and modest spending. But the return on your investment will be far greater than any return on a stock in your portfolio. Smart planning can sometimes mean the difference between living independently in your home or living in an assisted living facility or nursing home.

Guess what? The “boomers” are fast approaching the time when they might be at risk for a nursing home stay, unless that investment is made now. Aging experts have said that our lifestyle choices in mid-life will likely predict our success in later life. Wise choices every step of the way toward our senior years will help avoid institutionalization, preserve a high quality of life and save everybody money.

“If you can't completely avoid a nursing home stay, you may well be able to make it a short term proposition, where you recover and go home,” says John Noreika, executive director of Oakwood Village retirement center in Madison, and a strong supporter of SAIL (Support for Active Independent Lives), which provides services to help seniors live safely in their homes.

One way to up the odds of staying independent is to carefully manage your medications, which becomes increasingly important as we age, says Madison pharmacist Alan Lukazewski. When an older person has trouble correctly taking their medications, he says that leads to an “aggravation of conditions, complications and hospitalizations.” In fact, not taking medications, taking incorrect doses or taking too many medications is shown to almost guarantee a medication related problem which results in an unnecessary doctor's visit or hospitalization.

“Frequently, medications are over-relied upon and people are not looking at the holistic approach to preventing some of the most common health complications from occurring,” explains Lukazewski. “You can have a more successful aging experience. Life with drugs is not all it's cracked up to be.”

Two important non-pharmaceutical ways to prevent many problems are to eat nutritious meals and remain physically fit.

“Appropriate exercise that is not hazardous or unscientific is one of the most important factors in maintaining a healthy, independent life,” adds Noreika. He says walking and weight training, for example, are excellent activities that help maintain strength and vitality.

Once the basics of proper medication use, eating well and exercising are taken care of, it's also critical to safeguard your physical and mental health. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Eliminate physical risks at home. Have your residence checked to make sure you have a safe environment where you are least likely to suffer a fall.
- See your friends! A lack of socialization after retirement or the loss of a spouse can lead to depression, appetite loss, poor nutrition, weakness, falls and other health threats.

- Be vigilant about health problems. Urinary incontinence and memory loss are among common problems later in life that often can be managed.
- Confront pain. You don't have to hurt if you seek the appropriate help in managing pain.
- Get a little help. If you're in your 70s or 80s, it's not a good idea to be climbing ladders to clean leaves out of the gutter. Balance and joint flexibility declines with age, as does physical stamina. Why take the chance?

The good news is that seniors can get assistance with all of these issues for a fraction of the \$250 per day it typically costs for help in a nursing home. The pay off is in an independent, satisfying life, but also one that doesn't bankrupt the family. Keep in mind, that Medicare, for the most part, doesn't cover nursing home care. If you require long term care, your assets may quickly vanish.

The wisest elderly citizens realize it's smart to invest a little up front in their independence. "Accurate information and useful resources are your most valuable assets to healthy aging. Implementing the lifestyle changes that result may very well require a small investment in order to pay big dividends," adds Lukazewski.

Noreika agrees. "Successful aging means enjoying a high quality of life by preparing for your future instead of just waiting for it to arrive. Taking control of your destiny when you are still relatively healthy will be the most important decision of your life," says Noreika.

You can do that by banding together with other older citizens in the community and take advantage of the many services available. Of course, there are no guarantees in life, but one can certainly take wise precautions and confront problems before they progress into serious threats to your independence.

Editor's note: *Ann Albert, is program director for the non-profit organization, SAIL (Support for Active Independent Lives). Get more information at www.sailtoday.org or at (608) 276-1560*