Helping seniors navigate COVID-19

Anyone who’s been around for 65 years or more has lived through their fair share of historical events. Cultural, technological, political, you name it – they’ve seen a lot. But they haven’t seen anything quite like COVID-19. And unfortunately, this pandemic is particularly concerning to them because they’re at a higher risk for severe illness if infected.

For that reason, senior citizens around the world have been advised to limit their risk of exposure by staying home and avoiding contact with potential virus carriers. Nursing homes have also suspended visitations and local organizations are recruiting volunteers to deliver food and medicines to seniors.

Many people are understandably concerned for their elderly loved ones’ physical and emotional well-being. It can be especially difficult for those separated by distance and unable to provide direct support. But regardless of distance, all family members can play a significant role in helping the seniors they love navigate these uncharted waters. Below are six key questions to ask seniors to help determine if they need any extra help.

1. How are your basic needs being met?

Do you know how your loved ones are getting groceries, medicines and basic household items? The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends older seniors stay home as much as possible and have 30 days of groceries and prescriptions on hand.

Are your loved ones heeding that warning or still going out to get supplies? Find out if any stores in their community are offering delivery or special hours for seniors to shop. If not, are there other family members, friends, neighbors or organizations in the area who can help? Your employee assistance program (EAP) can also help you research local elder care resources.

2. Are you following the CDC’s recommendations for senior citizens?

Just like everyone else, seniors should wash their hands thoroughly and often and avoid touching their face. Frequently touched surfaces should be cleaned and disinfected regularly. This is especially true if others are living in the home. If someone is ill, the sick person should stay in a different room from those who are healthy – and if possible, use a separate bathroom.

3. Do you know the symptoms of COVID-19?

The most common symptoms are fever, dry cough and tiredness. Some people also develop nasal congestion or a runny nose, body aches, sore throat or diarrhea. Seniors should contact their doctor if they experience any of those conditions. They should seek immediate medical attention if they have shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, chest pain, confusion, difficulty walking, or blue coloration of the lips or face. If your loved ones have any upcoming doctor’s appointments or medical procedures scheduled, find out if those can be postponed.
4. Are you feeling anxious?

If your loved ones are anxious, they’re not alone – many of us are feeling uneasy right now. It’s important to find healthy ways to manage those feelings though because anxiety can compromise the immune system and cause a host of other health issues.

Encourage your loved ones to do things that bring them joy at home, like reading, writing letters or practicing putts in the backyard. If they have access to the internet, museums, universities and musicians around the world are offering free online tours, classes and performances.

Keeping to a normal routine – minus any activities that would require them to leave home – can also be helpful. You’d be surprised how something as simple as cooking or washing the car can bring a sense of normalcy to an otherwise chaotic day.

The CDC also recommends taking breaks from watching, reading or listening to news stories, including social media. A constant stream of news coverage can heighten anxiety. And when they do seek news updates, they should make sure they’re getting them from reputable sources.

5. Are you connecting with others?

Loneliness is already an issue for many seniors, and the social isolation created by COVID-19 can make it worse. Friends and family can help by scheduling regular phone calls, and with today’s technology, seniors may also be able to video chat. With an internet connection and the right equipment, anyone can connect face-to-face without leaving the house. Popular video chat apps to consider include Facebook Messenger, Google Duo, IMO, Skype, Viber and WhatsApp. It’s best to choose one you’re comfortable with so you can offer coaching and encouragement.

6. Are you protecting yourself from scammers?

Unfortunately, there are people who are treating this pandemic as an opportunity to scam others and they often start by targeting seniors. Remind your loved ones to be vigilant. They shouldn’t buy products that claim to protect against or cure this virus. Nor should they give any personal or financial information to anyone over the phone, even if the caller says they’re a government representative. Seniors should also avoid donating to charitable organizations that they don’t already know and trust.

You can also find this information here.