

Savvy Senior – May articles

1. Home Safety Solutions for Seniors Who Live Alone
2. It's Never Too Late to Quit Smoking
3. Grand Vacations for Grandparents and Grandkids
4. Cancer Care: Resources that can help seniors after a diagnosis

Savvy Senior

Home Safety Solutions for Seniors Who Live Alone

Each year, one-third of seniors in the United States suffer a fall, often with serious consequences. Add in the fact that 11 million Americans age 65 and older live alone and we've got a serious problem on our hands. The solution: A "personal emergency response system," or PERS – which is essentially a wireless hotline to help.

A PERS is a home-based emergency alert service that will connect your elder parent to a 24-hour call center with the push of a button. The transmitter (SOS button) is typically worn as a neck pendant, wrist band or belt clip. When pushed it sends a signal to a receiver console that's connected to the home telephone line (they don't work with cell phones). When your parent pushes the button, the dispatcher at the call center evaluates your situation, and will notify you, another relative, a caregiver or 911, as needed. With most PERS set-ups, your parent can talk with the dispatcher from anywhere in the house through the system's receiver which works like a powerful speaker phone.

While a PERS can be a wonderful home device for elderly seniors, it does have its drawbacks. Many seniors don't wear their SOS button regularly, and if they do have it on and fall, they still have to be alert enough to actually hit the button.

Where to Look

With all the different PERSs available today, the Internet is the best place to start your search. PERSs are available through national companies (such as www.lifelinesys.com, www.rescuealert.com, www.lifefone.com and www.lifestation.com) as well as local or regional providers. Local providers are usually run by hospitals or social service agencies. A typical Internet search will bring up only the national companies. Adding a town, county, or state to your search will help you find local or regional options. Also check with your Area Aging Agency (call 800-677-1116 to get your local number). It's worth checking out both local and national providers because features, pricing and quality will vary.

Options and Costs

In most cases, PERS equipment (receiver console and SOS button) is rented but some companies offer the option to buy. Costs, too, will vary but you can expect to pay a small set-up or activation fee along with a monthly service/monitoring fee, usually around \$1 per day. Most companies give discounts for longer-term agreements, but be careful of contracts that lock you in. Some services may even offer discounted pricing options for lower-income seniors. You'll need to ask. And some companies may provide extras services (in addition to the basic PERS) such as check-in calls, wake-up calls and medication reminders for an additional cost. When choosing a service, pay attention to

the small print and always ask for a detailed price quote. Most health insurance plans, including Medicare, don't cover PERSs.

Home Monitoring

If you're looking for a more thorough service, check out "home monitoring systems." These services combine the PERS with motion detectors (not cameras), placed in key areas of your parent's home, that will let you know (via phone or e-mail) if something out of the ordinary is happening. For example, if your mom or dad didn't get out of bed at their usual time, or went to the bathroom and didn't leave, this could indicate a fall or other emergency. The great thing about this type of system is it requires no input from your parent, and you can check in on him or her anytime through their password-protected Web site. These monitoring systems, however, are more expensive than a PERS and are not covered by insurance. To find and compare systems visit QuietCare (www.quietcare.com; 877-822-2468), Healthsense (www.healthsense.com; 800-576-1779) and GrandCare (www.grandcare.com; 262-338-6147).

Send your senior questions to: Savvy Senior, P.O. Box 5443, Norman, OK 73070, or visit www.savvysenior.org. Jim Miller is a contributor to the NBC *Today* show and author of "*The Savvy Senior*" book.

Savvy Senior

It's Never Too Late to Quit Smoking

The single best step an older smoker can take to improve their overall health and add years to their life is to quit – and it's never too late! Fortunately, there are more tools and treatments available today that can help. Here's what you should know.

Never Too Late

There are more than 45 million people in the U.S. who smoke cigarettes, about 13 million are age 50 or older, and 4.5 million are 65-plus. Research has shown that quitting, even after age 65, reduces risk for coronary heart disease, emphysema, lung cancer, osteoporosis, hearing loss, cataracts, impotence, poor circulation and Alzheimer's disease. It also helps you breathe easier, smell and taste food better, not to mention saves you quite a bit of money. A (\$5) pack-a-day smoker, for example, saves about \$150 after one month without cigarettes, and more than \$1,800 after one year.

According to the Center of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), about 60 percent of older smokers indicate they would like to completely quit, but because of the nicotine, which is considered to be more addictive than cocaine or heroin, it's very difficult to do. Here are some tips experts recommend that can help older smokers kick the habit.

Get Ready

The first step you need to take is to set a "quit date," but give yourself a few weeks to get ready. During that time you may want to start by reducing the number or the strength of cigarettes you smoke to start weaning yourself. Also check out over-the-counter nicotine replacement products (patches, gum and lozenges) to help curb your cravings. And just prior to your quit day get rid of all cigarettes and ashtrays in your home, car, and place of

work, and try to clean up and even spray air freshener. The smell of smoke can be a trigger.

Get Help

Studies have shown that you have a much better chance of quitting if you have help. So start by telling your friends, family, and coworkers of your plan to quit. Others knowing can be a helpful reminder and motivator. Then get some counseling. Don't go it alone. Free one-on-one telephone counseling, as well as coping strategies and referrals to local smoking cessation programs are available through the national tobacco "quitline" at 800-QUIT-NOW. The National Cancer Institute also offers a free smoking quitline at 877-44U-QUIT. You also need to make an appointment with your doctor to talk about prescription medications, including bupropion (Zyban) and varenicline (Chantix) that are extremely helpful at reducing nicotine cravings.

Make a Plan

It's also important to identify and write down the times and situations you're most likely to smoke and make a list of things you can do to replace it or distract yourself. Some helpful suggestions when the smoking urge arises are to call a friend or one of the free quitlines, keep your mouth occupied with some sugar-free gum, sunflower seeds, carrots, fruit or hard candy, go for a walk, read a magazine or take a hot bath. The intense urge to smoke lasts about three to five minutes, so do what you can to wait it out. It's also wise to avoid drinking alcohol and steer clear of other smokers while you're trying to quit. Both can trigger powerful urges to smoke.

Savvy Tips: For more tips on how to quit, including managing your cravings, withdrawal symptoms and what to do if you relapse, visit www.smokefree.gov. Medicare can also help (see www.medicare.gov/health/smoking.asp or call 800-633-4227). If you have Medicare Part B, smoking cessation counseling is covered if you're diagnosed with a smoking-related illness or are taking medicines that tobacco use might affect. And if you have a Medicare Part D prescription drug plan, certain smoking-cessation medications are covered. Medicare does not however pay for over-the-counter smoking-cessation products – patches, gum and lozenges.

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Grand Vacations for Grandparents and Grandkids

Taking the grandkids on vacation has become increasingly popular in recent years. In fact, according to the Yankelovich Partners National Leisure Travel Monitor, nearly 30 percent of traveling grandparents have taken at least one trip with a grandchild over the past year. Vacationing with your grandkids is a wonderful way to have fun and strengthen your relationships, especially if you live far away and don't get a chance to see them that often.

Travel Companies

Today there are a number travel organizations and companies that offer specialized vacation packages for grandparents and grandchildren. This is a nice way to go because they plan everything for you, with most activities for the two generations together, but some just for adults so you can get an occasional breather.

Available in all price ranges, these tours are typically designed for children between the ages seven, up to 17 or 18, and are usually scheduled in the summer, or sometimes during winter breaks, when the kids are out of school. Here are some top tour companies that will take you and your grandkids on a fun, well-planned vacation.

Elderhostel: For an educational and relatively low-cost vacation, Elderhostel, the world's largest educational travel organization for adults 55 and over, offers a wide variety of trips for grandparents and grandchildren too. Visit www.elderhostel.org (or call 800-454-5768) and click on "Grandparent Travel" for a list of more than 300 vacation plans throughout the U.S. and abroad. Most of the U.S. trips are around five days and costing anywhere from \$500 to \$1,000 per person, while the international trips typically last one to two weeks costing between \$150 and \$350 per person per day. These prices do not include transportation to the destination.

Sierra Club: If you're the outdoorsy type, the Sierra Club (www.sierraclub.org/outings; 415-977-5522) offers a variety of affordable "family outings" and "local outings" near you to choose from. They also offer an annual week-long "Just for Grandparents and Grandkids" outing in July in Tahoe National Forest, California. Cost: \$545 per adult and \$445 per child.

Grandtravel: This is the first company to send grandparents and grandchildren (ages seven to 17) off on vacation together. Grandtravel (www.grandtrvl.com; 800-247-7651) offers seven to 13-day luxury tours scheduled in July and August with destinations to Washington D.C. and Williamsburg, Alaska, Italy, London and Paris, and New Zealand. These trips are educational (led by teacher-escorts), limited to 30 or fewer participants and expensive ranging between \$3,000 and \$7,200 per person.

Generations Touring Company: This is another deluxe tour operator that specializes in intergeneration travel. They offer a variety of week-long tours to destinations like the Grand Canyon, Peru, and the Galapagos Islands in Ecuador. And for sports fans, they have a "Baseball's Sacred Grounds" summer tour which includes visits to Boston's historic Fenway Park, New York's new Yankee Stadium, and a trip to Cooperstown to tour the Baseball Hall of Fame. Costs for all tours range between \$2,100 and \$4,000 per person. www.generationstouringcompany.com, 888-415-9100.

Consider Cruising

Another popular option to consider is to take your grandkids on a cruise. This offers a safe and secure environment that's pretty affordable with plenty of facilities, activities and dining options to keep everyone happy. Disney, Carnival, Holland, Royal Caribbean, Princess and Norwegian cruise lines all offer appealing options for intergenerational travelers. To find out what's available contact a travel agent (see www.cruising.org to

find an agent who specializes in cruises) or visit Cruises For Families (www.cruisesforfamilies.com; 877-386-9243).

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Savvy Senior

Cancer Care: Resources that can help seniors after a diagnosis

Being diagnosed with cancer has got to be one of the most difficult and shocking experiences a person can go through, yet 1.4 million Americans will experience it this year alone. If it happens to you, here is a guide that can help you get more informed about your condition, and organize a plan for treatment.

Get Informed

If you're like most people you're clueless about cancer. So your first step is to learn about your specific type of cancer along with the treatment options, and thanks to the Internet it's easy to do. To get started go the National Cancer Institute (NCI) at www.cancer.gov and click on your cancer type in the A to Z list of cancers. Other good and reliable sites to visit are www.cancer.org, www.medlineplus.gov and www.mayoclinic.com.

Choose a Doctor

After you know a bit about your illness, you'll need to choose a good doctor. The American Society of Clinical Oncology (www.cancer.net) provides tips on how to choose a cancer doctor (known as an oncologist), along with a searchable database to help you locate one. Also see www.vitals.com, a Web resource that will help you locate, evaluate and choose a doctor based on their training, expertise, consumer ratings and recommendations from other doctors. (Be sure the doctor you choose accepts your health plan.) And to locate one of the 60 plus NCI cancer centers across the country see Cancercenters.cancer.gov.

Research Alternative Medicine

If you're interested in learning more about herbs, supplements and other alternative approaches to fighting cancer, go to the National Center for Alternative and Complementary Medicine (www.nccam.nih.gov). Also, check-out the complementary and alternative medicine guides from M.D. Anderson Cancer Center at www.mdanderson.org/departments/cimer.

Find Support Services

There are lots of programs and services available today that can help you with a wide variety of cancer-related issues. For example, there are counselors, social workers and cancer support groups that can help with depression, anxiety and other psychological issues; nutritionists and dietitians to help deal with nausea, loss of appetite, fatigue or mouth sores; and physical therapist, pain specialist, acupuncturist and massage therapist that can assist with pain and discomfort.

To find what's available near you, start by asking the doctor, clinic, medical center or hospital that will be treating you. Larger health care or cancer treatment centers usually offer a wide variety of on-staff support services. However, if you're being treated in a small clinic or live in a rural area, finding help may be more difficult. You can also visit the American Cancer Society Web site at www.cancer.org, type in her zip code and search for services online.

If you don't find any programs locally that meets your needs, there are also a growing number of Internet support services that can be very helpful too. Some good ones to check out include: CancerCare (www.cancer.org; 800-813-4673); American Cancer Society Cancer Survivors Network (www.acscsn.org); The Lance Armstrong Foundation (www.livestrong.org; 866-673-7205); and the Association of Cancer Online Resources (www.acor.org).

Find Clinical Trials

At some point in your cancer treatment, you may decide to join a study of a new therapy. The Coalition of Cancer Cooperative Groups (www.cancertrials.org; 877-227-8451) and the NCI (www.cancer.gov/clinicaltrials; 800-422-6237) are fantastic resources for learning about and finding clinical trials. They also have questions you should ask before becoming involved in these medical experiments.

Get Financial Help

If you're insurance is limited or if you don't have insurance at all, there are financial assistance programs that may be able to help. See www.cancer.org and click on "Get Help" then on "Assistance," or call 800-813-4673 to learn more. The NCI also offers financial assistance information on their Web site at www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/support - click on "Financial Assistance and Other Resources for People With Cancer."

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