

BLUE STAR
CAREGIVERS

Keeping Your Parents Out of the Nursing Home



Introduction

People are living longer, healthier, more productive lives than ever before. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the [average life expectancy](#) in the U.S. is 78.8 years. As the baby boomers age, the number of older adults is expected to increase exponentially over the coming decades.

Although many nursing homes and assisted living facilities today offer wonderful care, many seniors would prefer to live out their lives [in the comfort of their home](#). Additionally, long-term care facilities require significant financial resources, making them cost-prohibitive for many seniors.

Take [Richard Overton](#), for example, who at 111 years old is believed to be the oldest living World War II veteran. Instead of moving into a nursing home, he wishes to live his final days in the Austin, Texas, home he built and has lived in since he returned from the war in 1945. A family member started a [GoFundMe campaign](#) to raise funds to pay for an in-home caregiver, and now, he will be able to stay in his own home thanks to the generosity of appreciative Americans everywhere.



Richard Overton at his home in Austin, Texas.

Source: Deborah Cannon, Austin American-Statesman

[Retired Rear Admiral Robert Wray, U.S. Navy](#), started BlueStar SeniorTech, a company dedicated to helping seniors

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stay independent longer and maximize the number of days they can spend at home and out of the nursing home. It became clear to Wray that he needed to identify strategies to allow older adults — including his parents, parents-in-law, and aunts and uncles who are all in their 70s, 80s and 90s — to live independently for as long as possible.

Wray collaborated with [Dr. Rosemary Laird](#), a board-certified geriatrician and a recipient of the Clinician of the Year award from the American Geriatrics Society, and [Dr. Ron Poropatich](#), a retired U.S. Army colonel and a professor of medicine at the University of Pittsburgh, to create a list of seven golden rules for adult children to follow that will help them keep their parents out of the nursing home.

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CHAPTER ONE

Build a Caregiving Team

Caregiving for older parents is a team sport. It involves preparing a care plan, assessing medical needs, monitoring medication, assisting with basic needs, preparing meals, housekeeping, transferring and transporting, providing companionship, and monitoring the performance of their care.

If you're the family member faced with a parent — or parents — who needs help, the key is to build a caregiving team. Caregiving should never be done by just one person. If you're the only person caring for your mom, it's not good for you or her.

Don't hesitate to call on family and friends for help, use the internet to communicate with your team, and identify community resources that offer services to older people and their families.

The team should include your parents, their health care providers, their caregivers, their friends and neighbors, and multiple members of your family.

Shared decision-making is a critical component of the team's dynamic. When decision-making is shared, your parents and their caregiving team collaborate to meet their needs while also honoring their goals, priorities, preferences and values. Hold a caregiving team meeting so everyone can share their views and help decide how best to proceed.

If you're the primary caregiver, a care team not only provides backup when you need it, but it also means that there are more people to suggest potentially helpful changes. By sharing caregiving with a team, you support one another, reduce both the burden and the cost, and help keep your loved one at home.

CHAPTER TWO

Encourage Activity

There's an old saying that life rewards action. It has meanings on multiple levels, but at the most basic level, activity and action lead to healthier, more fulfilling lives.

It's never too late in life to start exercising, and physical activity need not be strenuous to achieve health benefits. You don't have to take up running or downhill skiing. Taking a 30-minute walk every day can impact your life and health in enormous ways. For seniors, it can mean the difference between independent living and relying on others to provide care.

Exercise for seniors is essential for good health

🔗 Physical activity:

- ★ Helps maintain the ability to live independently and reduces the risk of falling and fracturing bones;
- ★ Reduces the risk of dying from coronary heart disease and of developing high blood pressure, colon cancer and diabetes;
- ★ Can help reduce blood pressure in some people with hypertension;
- ★ Helps people with chronic, disabling conditions improve their stamina and muscle strength;
- ★ Reduces symptoms of anxiety and depression and fosters improvements in mood and feelings of well-being;
- ★ Helps maintain healthy bones, muscles and joints; and
- ★ Helps control joint swelling and pain associated with arthritis.



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CHAPTER TWO: ENCOURAGE ACTIVITY

Social support from family and friends has been consistently and positively related to regular physical activity, so find ways for your parents to be active, whether that's walking, playing golf, doing yard work or gardening. Provide transportation to parks or facilities that provide physical activity programs, and ask your parents' health care providers to talk routinely to them about incorporating physical activity into their lives.

If your parents find it hard to make themselves be active, it helps to choose activities that are fun and interesting. The “best” exercise or physical activity is the type they will actually do, and the only goal needs to be that they get moving.

For example, working outside in the garden involves bending and lifting, moving and stretching, and digging and hauling. When they're lifting a bag of mulch, transplanting seedlings, raking leaves or pulling weeds, they're also improving their endurance, strength, balance and flexibility.

Before beginning a new physical activity program, older adults should consult with a physician.

CHAPTER THREE

Manage Chronic Health Conditions

About 80 percent of Americans over the age of 75 have one or more chronic conditions, such as hypertension, heart disease, obesity or diabetes. Failure to properly manage those conditions can often lead to a crisis, which leads to the nursing home. Conversely, managing chronic conditions can be among the most effective ways to ensure good health and good quality of life for seniors and their families.



If you are caring for an aging parent, you are probably well-acquainted with their pill organizer. The treatment of chronic illnesses in the elderly commonly includes the long-term use of medications. But drugs don't work in patients who don't take them, and about 50 percent of patients don't take their medications as prescribed.

There are many factors that could contribute to nonadherence, including poor communication between the patient and the health care provider and difficulty opening the drug packaging. However, one of the most common patient factors affecting medication adherence is working memory. Although age-related changes in memory are normal, if a patient frequently misses his medications, the chronic diseases may not be well controlled and may even result in progression of the disease.

So how do you make sure Dad takes two red pills and one white pill after breakfast every day? In addition to providing education about his medications and disease and packing his pills individually for ease of consumption, it can also be helpful to simplify the regime and provide reminders throughout the day.

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Reminder Rosie is a personalized voice reminder alarm clock that was designed to provide a simple way to remind older adults to take their medications. Instead of constantly nagging about medication adherence, simply record up to 25 reminders to help your loved one never forget to take their medications again.

Another way to help seniors manage chronic health conditions is to make sure they get the right nutrients. As people age, they need fewer calories to maintain a healthy weight. However, the need for certain vitamins and minerals, including calcium, vitamin D, and vitamins B6 and B12, increases after age 50. Encourage your loved one to eat more nutrient-rich foods, such as vegetables and fruits, beans and lentils, nuts and seeds, whole grains, low-fat dairy, and lean protein, to help them get the vitamins, minerals, protein, carbohydrates and fats they need. If they do rely on convenience foods, look for prepackaged foods that are low in added sugar, saturated fat and salt.

If you want to protect your loved one's health, consider buying them a health monitoring device, which measures blood pressure, blood sugar or weight.

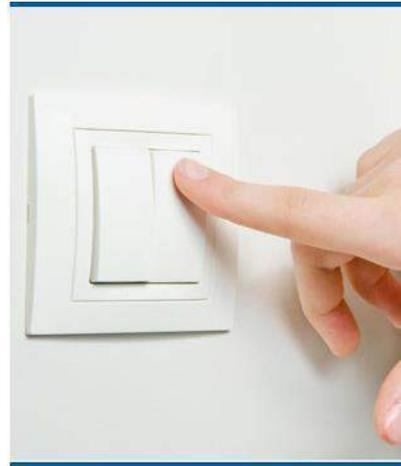
CHAPTER FOUR

Modify the Home

As your parents age, you need to — gently — adjust their home to meet their new needs. There are simple things you can do to prepare the home to make it easier and safer to live in.

For People Who Have Difficulties with Vision

- ★ Install new lights or increase lighting on exterior pathways, porches and doorways.
- ★ Increase lighting on all stairs either by plugging night-lights into wall outlets or installing overhead fixtures or wall sconces.
- ★ Install light switches that glow in the dark.
- ★ Place lighting over the sink, stove and other work areas in the kitchen.
- ★ Place automatic light-sensor night-lights in hallways and rooms.
- ★ Add lighting to closets.
- ★ Install a thermostat that's easy to read.



For People Who Have Difficulties with Strength

- ★ Replace round doorknobs with easier-to-use lever-style door handles.
- ★ Replace traditional toggle-style light switches with larger, easier- to-use rocker-style light switches.
- ★ Repair or replace any hard-to-open windows.

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For People Who Have Difficulties with Getting Around



- ★ Use adjustable and low rods and shelves in closets and cabinets. Consider pull-out or pull-down shelves or drawers designed to close automatically.
- ★ Have the dishwasher elevated to reduce the amount of bending.
- ★ Place rolling casters on chairs.
- ★ Buy touch control lamps or “clapper” devices for lights and electronics.
- ★ Install a walk-in or no-threshold shower, a bath seat or bench, and an adjustable, handheld showerhead.
- ★ Install a telephone in multiple rooms (including the bathroom).

The [National Association of Home Builders](#) provides an overview of other small modifications you can make on your loved one’s home, and home health agencies and Area Agencies on Aging may help you do a home assessment and recommend modifications. Additionally, the VA offers programs to provide [home-modification grants to veterans](#) with certain severe service-connected disabilities.

CHAPTER FIVE

Prevent Falls

In addition to aerobic activity, older adults can benefit from muscle-strengthening activities. More than one-third of people age 65 or older fall every year, making falls the leading cause of fatal and non-fatal injuries for older Americans.

Seniors fall for a variety of reasons, including prescription medication, low and high blood pressure, impaired vision, decreased muscle mass, delayed reaction time, poor posture, infections, diseases, and stress. But even a simple fall can have a serious impact on their life. A fracture of the arm, hand, ankle or hip could limit their ability to perform activities of daily living or even live independently.

One of the best ways to prevent falls and fall-related injuries is to improve balance. Here are five balance exercises for seniors that increase their lower body strength. Your parents can do them anytime and anywhere, but make sure they have a sturdy chair, railing or person nearby to hold onto in case they feel unstable.

5 Easy Balance Exercises for Seniors

STANDING ON ONE FOOT

Stand on one foot behind a sturdy chair. If necessary, hold for balance. Hold this position for up to 10 seconds. Repeat 10 to 15 times with each leg, and then perform the exercise again.

WALKING HEEL TO TOE

Position the heel of one foot just in front of the toes of the other foot. Your heel and toes should touch or almost touch. Focus on a spot ahead of you to keep you steady as you walk. Take a step. Put your heel just in front of the toe of your other foot. Repeat for 20 steps.

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BALANCE WALK

Reach your arms out to your sides at shoulder height. Focus on a spot ahead of you to keep you steady as you walk. Walk in a straight line with one foot in front of the other. As you walk, lift your back leg. Pause for 1 second before stepping forward. Repeat for 20 steps, alternating legs.

BACK LEG RAISES

Stand behind a sturdy chair, and if necessary, hold for balance. Breathe in slowly. Breathe out, and slowly lift one leg straight back without bending your knee or pointing your toes. Try not to lean forward. The leg you are standing on should be slightly bent. Hold for 1 second. Breathe in as you slowly lower your leg. Repeat 10 to 15 times with each leg, and then perform the exercise again.

SIDE LEG RAISES

Start in the same position as you did for the back leg raises. This time, breathe in slowly, and when you breathe out, slowly lift one leg out to the side. Keep your back straight and your toes facing forward. The leg you are standing on should be slightly bent. Hold for 1 second. Breathe in as you slowly lower your leg. Repeat 10 to 15 times with each leg, and then perform the exercise again.



In addition to practicing these balance exercises, consider purchasing an alert system or device such as the [Admiral Protect](#), 

a mobile personal emergency response system (mPERS) that offers instant hands-free communication, location services and two-way voice communication. With an auto fall detection device, seniors who are living independently or are prone to falls retain freedom, security and the ability to manage their health.

For more tip on how to minimize the risk of failing, check out this [complete guide for seniors](#)  on preventing falls.

CHAPTER SIX

Bring Help to Them

There are a lot of things someone has to do to keep a household running smoothly, from doing laundry to going to the grocery store to staying on top of bills. Depending on how much support your family member needs with personal care, housecleaning, making nutritious meals and managing money, there are services that might be of help. Hiring a trained home health aide for a short time each day or setting up online grocery shopping to reduce the stress of going to the store might be all the support your loved one needs to stay at home.



To avoid the need to move into a nursing home, bring the help to your parents. Consider what type of help your loved ones need. Can they get by with skilled in-home assistance for only a small part of the day and for most of the day have a nonprofessional caregiver who simply provides free or low-cost companion care?

Having a nearby family member who's responsible for overseeing in-home caregiving and providing extra care and other assistance when needed will help your parents avoid a nursing home.

For example, if you coordinate with family and friends, is it possible to organize 10 people who would be willing to spend two hours with your parents every two weeks? Then, you'd have a five-day-a-week caregiver rotation ready to deploy.

If family and friends aren't plentifully available or if your loved one's need for skilled in-home care begins to grow, you can hire help. It's not cheap — skilled in-home care can cost \$20 to \$30 an hour

— but it's not impossible, either. One way to reduce the

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financial burden is to consider sharing paid caregiving services with a neighbor who also needs regular in-home care.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has a program in place to support veterans who need care and want to avail it at home, not in a nursing or rehabilitative facility. Veteran-directed Home and Community-based Services provides funding to veterans, allowing them to receive care at home from whomever they wish. The funds can be used for caregivers, adult day programs, transportation, and even to pay for help with home chores.

As part of this program, veterans and their caregivers have more access, choice and control over their long-term care services. For example, veterans can:

- ★ Decide what mix of services are best suited for their needs;
- ★ Hire their own personal care aides, which can include family or friends; and
- ★ Buy items and services that will help them live independently in the community.

The judicious application of in-home assistance can go a long way. Home care is less costly than facility care, so it helps keep your parents home where they want to be, and it saves money.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Avoid the ER

Sometimes, a senior slowly decays until she can't take of herself. Then for any number of reasons — from physical or mental health issues to dwindling finances — staying at home doesn't seem possible, and her family makes the decision to put her in a nursing home.

But more often, a calamitous event occurs that forces that decision. Almost a quarter of all seniors visit the emergency room. Some of the most common conditions that land seniors in the ER include injuries, falls, traffic accidents, exhaustion, adverse effects and complications of medical treatment, and infections.

Your aging parents might believe they're one injury or accident away from losing their cherished independence and ability to live at home. So instead of telling you about a fall, new or increasing pain, or driving infractions, they'll withhold information that may be important to their health, safety or general well-being.

Ironically, if your parents are keeping secrets from you, they're putting themselves in danger and often increasing the chance that they will have to rely on others to care for them. Help your loved ones by anticipating every potential calamitous event and proactively taking steps to reduce the risk of it happening.

An aware and proactive caregiver identifies not only hazards and obstacles but also tools and strategies that help older adults meet their goal of living at home. When considering your loved one's daily routine, ask yourself these questions:

- ★ Are there things that come easily for her? What does she have difficulty with?
- ★ Does he have comfortable, easy access to the primary spaces in the home?

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- ★ Is she able to go outside, watch television, cook, read or do the other things she enjoys doing, or do obstacles and barriers make those things difficult or impossible or downright dangerous?
- ★ Does he have safe and convenient transport to medical appointments, the grocery store and social functions? How are these needs being met?

When identifying trouble spots at home, look for these common hazards:

- ★ Area rugs
- ★ Poor lighting
- ★ Stairs without banisters or proper lighting
- ★ Low furniture that is hard to get in and out of
- ★ Uneven floors or walking surfaces
- ★ Computer or other electrical cords strung in high-traffic areas
- ★ Clutter on the floor
- ★ Low toilet seats
- ★ Hard-to-reach cupboards containing items used daily



What is working now may need to be adapted or changed in the future. So be proactive. As you become aware of the things that are working and the things that are harder for your parents to manage, make notes, and record any possible solutions or tools that could help them stay safe and engaged.



About BlueStar Caregivers

BlueStar SeniorTech is a service-disabled veteran-owned small business dedicated to improving the quality of care and life of veterans and seniors everywhere. Offering medical, emergency and health alert systems and senior care products, BlueStar helps make independent living safe and enjoyable while delivering peace of mind to seniors and their loved ones.

BlueStar supports caregivers through our non-profit site (www.BlueStarCaregivers.org). We support deserving senior veterans and their spouses through our 501(c)(3) charitable foundation, the Blue Star Senior Veterans Foundation (www.BlueStarSeniorVeterans.org).

BlueStar was founded by, and is operated by, veterans and their families. Our CEO and COO are retired two-star Navy admirals. We have 14 admirals and generals on our advisory board. We are dedicated to helping American seniors be Safe, Healthy, and Connected as they age. For more information, visit www.BlueStarSeniorTech.com.