

Aging parents: 10 things to know for an emergency

If your aging parents were to have a medical emergency, could you provide the information doctors would need to care for them? Do you know the names of your aging parents' doctors? Is your mom taking any medications? Has your dad ever had any surgery?

While you might not know the answers to some of these questions about your aging parents, it only takes a few minutes to collect and write down this vital information. And it can save precious time in an emergency.

"Sometimes a parent isn't able to give medical information when an emergency arises, so emergency medical personnel must rely on the adult children or a spouse for that information," says Paul Takahashi, M.D., a specialist in geriatrics at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn. "These are things you should know. Just as you fill out those emergency cards for your kids in school, you should have similar information available about your parents."

Below — in order of importance — is a list of 10 things you need to know about your aging parents' health.

Names of their doctors. If you don't know anything else, this is probably the most important piece of information. Why? Chances are good that your parents' doctors can provide much of the rest of the information needed as well as more details about your parents' specific health histories.

Birth dates. Often medical records and insurance information are cataloged according to birth date. This

can improve communication in an emergency or a crisis.

List of allergies. This is especially important if one of your parents is allergic to medication — penicillin, for example.

Advance directives. An advance directive is a legal document that outlines a person's decisions about his or her health care, such as whether or not resuscitation efforts should be made and the use of life-support machines.

Major medical problems. This includes such conditions as diabetes or heart disease.

List of medications and supplements. It's especially important that a doctor know if your parent uses blood thinners. It's also important for your doctor to know if your parents take any vitamin or herbal supplements that might interact with medications given in an emergency situation.

Religious beliefs. This is particularly important in case blood transfusions are needed.

Insurance information. Know the name of your parents' health insurance provider and their policy numbers.

Prior surgeries and major medical procedures. List past medical procedures including implanted medical devices such as pacemakers.

Lifestyle information. Do your parents drink alcohol or use tobacco?

Knowing these 10 things should help you take care of your parents in an emergency.

HIPAA and privacy During conversations with medical staff, the issue of privacy may come up. Staff may want to make sure

they're allowed to speak with you regarding your parent's care. In the United States, patient privacy is governed by rules often referred to as HIPAA, or the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act.

HIPAA does **not** prevent a doctor, nurse or health plan employee from discussing your parent's care with you if it's in the best interest of your parent. For example, if discussing your parent's care would help a doctor take care of your parent in an emergency situation, that's considered in your parent's best interest. Generally, doctors and other health care professionals would consider a situation to be an emergency if your parent cannot answer questions about their health and medical history. This situation might arise if your parent has lost consciousness or has problems with memory.

To help you care for your aging parents, fill out this downloadable emergency medical information form and keep it with you in your wallet or purse.

[Emergency medical form for your parents](#) (PDF file requiring [Adobe Reader](#))

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