

HOW TO KEEP
MOM
(AND YOURSELF)
OUT OF
A NURSING HOME

*Seven Keys to Keeping
Your Independence*

DAVID FISHER, MD, MPH

*For Jean, my inspiration
My home is forever with you*

YOU NEED A PLAN

The first thing you need to know about nursing homes is this: *you don't want to live in one.* As a nursing home physician, I have observed the slow and tragic decline these institutions inflict on their residents. This is not intentional; most nursing facilities spend millions of dollars and incorporate the efforts of dozens of thoughtful individuals in an attempt to serve their residents well. Nevertheless, institutional living by its very nature often leads to a downward spiral in almost every facet of health, whether physical, mental, emotional or spiritual. Furthermore, numerous unintended forces exist in nursing homes that can severely restrict a resident's chance of ever leaving. The primary purpose of this book is to help you or your loved one avoid the nursing home trap.

Why Nursing Homes Exist

In the popular movie *The Bucket List*, starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman, two aging men make a list of things they

How to Keep Mom (and Yourself) Out of a Nursing Home

would like to do before they die, or “kick the bucket.” They visit exotic places, go skydiving, and make amends with estranged loved ones. Not surprisingly, “to live in a nursing home” is nowhere on their list. Indeed, no one I know plans or hopes to end up in a nursing home. Most children of aging parents claim that no matter what, they will do whatever is necessary to keep mom or dad “out of a home.” Yet, in 2008, the US Census reports that almost 1.7 million Americans live in a nursing home. If none of the residents planned to, then why do so many people end up there? The answer can be summarized in three words: *loss of independence*. Loss of independence is the primary reason that you or a loved one will need future care in a nursing home.

Personal independence and self-determination are two of our most coveted values. Thomas Jefferson ranked the right to liberty (i.e. personal independence) and the pursuit of happiness (i.e. self-determination) on the same level with life itself. Health and independence are deeply intertwined; we pursue better health as a means to increase our chances of controlling our own destinies. For example, why do people monitor their blood pressure and cholesterol? There is no immediate payoff to lowering the systolic pressure by a few points or knocking out a few of the low density lipoproteins (LDLs) circulating through our bloodstream; we feel the same whether our cholesterol is 160 or 245. Yet, we acknowledge that doing what we can now to avoid a heart attack or stroke later will keep us out of the hospital, off of medications, and will allow us to go and do what we want when we want. Do we sometimes run or swim the extra lap for the pure joy of it? Yes, but more often than not, the extra effort now is simply to let us

justify some extra dessert later on. In the same way, we pursue better health now so we can remain independent later.

So what does independence have to do with living in a nursing home? Everything. Every person who lives in a nursing home needs help with some daily activity, but they did not have the resources to get that help at home. The activities they need help with are those we often take for granted: eating, bathing, grooming, walking or getting out of bed, and toileting. These daily necessities to independent living have been defined as the Activities of Daily Living, or “ADL’s”. Much of this book will explore strategies for maintaining ADL function as the primary means to stay out of a nursing home. People who cannot independently perform their ADLs will quickly end up in a nursing home without full-time help.

Aging is Not the Enemy

I am a medical doctor who specializes in geriatrics, the medical specialty that focuses on aging. Thanks to tremendous medical advances over the past century, people are living longer than ever. The quest for youth continues to invade our nation’s consciousness. We cannot turn on the TV or open a magazine without hearing about the latest anti-aging diet or lifestyle. Incredible and promising research is being done that will continue to extend the average human lifespan, and some experts are predicting advances in longevity that we never would have thought possible even twenty years ago. While this progress is exciting, a longer life by itself is not the ultimate goal.

If I told you that you could live to be one hundred and fifty, would you be overjoyed or would you worry? When I ask my

How to Keep Mom (and Yourself) Out of a Nursing Home

patients if they want me to help them live longer, they will inevitably answer yes, but they will always add some type of qualifier, such as:

“Sure, doc, as long as I still have my wits about me.”

“Absolutely, provided I’m not in a lot of pain.”

“Definitely, as long as I can still go bowling.”

“Yes, but if I ever have to move to a nursing home, I’m not so sure.” A longer life is not the real goal here. *Length* of life is only worthwhile if it is coupled with *quality of life*.

What gives us quality of life? The contributing factors are many, whether it is doing things we enjoy, spending meaningful time with family and friends, the feeling that we are contributing to society, or the ability to foster and maintain our spiritual growth. When we talk about “staying young” or maintaining our “quality of life”, what we are really talking about is independence, keeping some level of control and autonomy over our own lives. To lose our independence is to lose our very humanity.

The science of geriatrics defines healthy aging by one’s ability to function independently. Aging tends to rob us of our independence. Losing the ability to drive, for example, can be a brutal blow to the previously independent adult. Aging causes a steady decline in our independent function, beginning with more advanced skills such as driving a car or operating a business and culminating in the loss of the most basic human functions such as the ability to independently use the bathroom or feed ourselves. Those who have cared for an aging loved can testify to the devastating toll taken by this long, painful process.

In my practice, I have admitted thousands of people to nursing homes. I have heard the same stories over and over

as patients and their families describe the specific factors and events that led to loss of independence and subsequent placement in a nursing home. From those stories emerge a few well-defined pathways that will inevitably lead to nursing home placement. Insight into these pathways cannot be gleaned from poring over facility admission records or reviewing Medicare data. Understanding why people end up in nursing homes is best achieved by listening to their stories, something I do everyday as a physician. I hope to share that knowledge with you so that you and your loved ones can avoid the common pitfalls into which many of my patients have unwittingly fallen.

The Keys to Independence

As we battle the toll that aging takes on the body, spirit, and larger community, we need to redefine the enemy. As mentioned earlier, the enemy is not aging. It is the loss of independence. How do we fight from losing our independence? Is the answer found in a diet, a vitamin, a martial art, or a medical procedure? Prominent physicians have devoted entire careers to slowing the aging process, and I hope this research continues. Unfortunately, many of us are already dealing with the impact of a chronic disease on our health or the health of a loved one. Despite our best efforts to adhere to the recommended healthy habits, we are all likely to develop one or more age-related chronic conditions or illnesses. Further, maintaining health takes time and resources. It is difficult to sift through the enormous amount of information available today and determine what health recommendations are most important to follow.

How to Keep Mom (and Yourself) Out of a Nursing Home

This book will give you a strategic plan that focuses on maintaining the aspects of health that are most important to independent living. The field of geriatrics research ranges widely, from exploring the genetic causes of aging to understanding the characteristics of people who live one hundred or more years. I have relied heavily on the aspects of geriatric research that emphasize the practical nature of daily function. For example, to stay out of a nursing home, is it more important to have strong biceps or a strong external urinary sphincter muscle? The answer may surprise you.

For those who are the picture of health, you will learn where to continue focusing your efforts. For those who are beginning to feel the effects of aging, you will learn to identify warning signs and how to respond in a way that maximizes your efforts toward maintaining independence. And for those who are on the brink of needing nursing home care, you will read about the pitfalls that could ultimately place you in one and what specific steps you can still take to avoid leaving your precious home.

As a physician specializing in geriatrics, I want to put myself out of a job. While I enjoy interacting with my patients who live in various nursing homes, I am distressed by the number of people who probably could have avoided ever being admitted. I have met many wonderful people who needed this book just a few years, or even a few months, earlier. Unfortunately, age-related health crises will be impossible to eliminate and there will always be a need for nursing home care. I pray that with the help of this book, you will be able to choose a better story for yourself or your loved one.