

**Health** Monday, December 15, 2008 9:56 AM CST

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## Holidays can reveal lapses, but don't assume parent has Alzheimer's Local experts say other explanations must first be examined

By Paul Swiech

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BLOOMINGTON -- If you notice changes in your parents when you go home for the holidays, you're not alone. "We usually get calls around this time of year from adult children and other relatives who notice weight loss, forgetfulness, repetitive talking such as telling the same story, poor hygiene, dirty clothing, or the house being in bad shape or bills not being paid," said Kathryn Johnson, PATH (Providing Access To Help) program manager of senior outreach and caregiver adviser for McLean, Livingston and DeWitt counties. | [Daughter adjusts to her changing mother](#) | [Quick facts about Alzheimer's](#) | [What are the warning signs?](#)

But be careful. Don't assume your parent or elderly relative has Alzheimer's disease or another form of dementia. Other explanations must be examined first before Alzheimer's disease is considered.

The holidays are a time that brings families together. In some cases, adult children who live away may be spending extended time with their parent for the first time in months and may notice disturbing things.

The parent may leave oven burners on, may be dressed shabbily or may forget they've eaten dinner, said Dr. Moises Googe of the BroMenn Memory & Aging Clinic in Normal. They may say whatever comes to mind and may become irritable.

Rose Stadel, of the CAPS (Children of Aging Parents Support group), said adult children have told her about aging parents forgetting how to bake a favorite recipe, responding inappropriately to a question or not recalling the name of a family member.

"They may prepare a meal but forget it's there," said Wade Ceis, coordinator of Legacy Care, the unit for people with Alzheimer's disease at Heritage Manor of Normal.

"We all walk into a room and forget why we're there. We all forget our keys," said Stadel, vice president of operations for the Central Region of Heritage Enterprises, which owns and operates long-term care facilities. But when you get lost in your own house or forget how to use keys, that's a concern, she said.

"But don't just assume that it's dementia," Stadel said. "Look at everything."

### What to look for

First, look at your parents' medicine cabinet. New medicine may interact with other medicines and may hurt brain function, Googe and Johnson said. Taking the incorrect dosage or taking expired medicine also may cause problems.



Karen McGuire, left, of Bloomington shares a moment with her mother, Barbara Freeburg, right, before she feeds her a sandwich at Heritage Manor in Normal on Dec. 4.  
(The Pantagraph/B Mosher)

Ask the parent why they are taking the medicine, if they've had trouble with it and whether they think it's helping.

Next, check their eating and drinking habits. If they are eating poorly and not getting enough nutrition, and not drinking enough water so that they are becoming dehydrated, that can hurt their energy and cause confusion, Stadel said.

Third, ask the parent if they've fallen recently or are in pain. Some older people fall and suffer a concussion but don't tell their children. In addition, a fever or urinary tract infection may cause confusion, Johnson and Stadel said.

Fourth, observe the parent and ask him or her how they're feeling. Depression and anxiety may result in loss of concentration, Johnson said.

As you are expressing concern about your parent's safety, consider his or her feelings, treat them with respect and involve them in decision-making as much as possible.

"You don't want them to be embarrassed," Ceis said. "But it's something you have got to do."

If these moves don't solve the problem, it's time to go to their doctor.

The primary care physician will know from his or her examination whether another illness is present and how it may be treated, Googe said. If the doctor suspects Alzheimer's disease or another type of dementia, he or she will refer the patient to a neurologist or psychiatrist for further testing.

While there is no cure for Alzheimer's disease, medicines and programs may slow the progression of the disease if it's detected early enough, Googe said.

In the early stages of the disease, resources such as Peace Meal and YWCA Senior Services may help to keep the parent at home longer. When the parent can't be home alone during the day, BroMenn Adult Day Care may be an answer.

Later, families may consider whether to bring the parent to live at home with them or to place the parent in a nursing home that specializes in care for people with Alzheimer's disease.

Throughout the process, engage siblings, even those who live far away.

"Everyone needs to be involved," Stadel said.

Family members can help with decision-making and with caring for the aging parent but also can support each other.

For adult children who need additional support, information and help with stress reduction, consider a support group through CAPS or the Alzheimer's Association.

"It's good to know you're not alone," Stadel said.

As the disease progresses, be patient, supportive and understanding.

"You will not be able to change their behavior," Stadel said. "But you can change how you react to that behavior."