

Catholic Caregivers

'Caregiving is pro-life!'

When Your Loved One Has Poor Vision

Most of us, as the years go by, experience a gradual decline in our ability to see. Getting reading glasses or changing to bifocals is almost a middle-age rite of passage. But your loved one's major vision loss may be due to illness, not just getting older. If Dad's eyesight is failing, it's critical that he have the problem checked by a physician. If the family has a history of diabetes, he should have his eyes examined more frequently.

Among the common complaints your care-receiver may have are problems focusing on close objects (a condition known as presbyopia), floaters, dry eye, or excessive tears. Other illnesses and conditions that may affect vision are cataracts, glaucoma, macular degeneration, diabetes, and a variety of retinal disorders.

Look for subtle signs. Maybe Mom has stopped doing her needlepoint or reading for pleasure. Maybe Dad is tripping over things.

Even without suffering from an illness or low vision, your senior family member may not see as well as he or she did at a younger age. In older age, it's common for peripheral vision to diminish, for eyes to take longer to adjust in the dark, and for colors to fade and depth perception to decline. (These vision impairments make driving especially hazardous.)

Look for subtle signs. Maybe Mom has stopped doing her needlepoint or reading for pleasure. Maybe Dad is tripping over things. Maybe Mom looks more disheveled, because she can't see the stains on her blouse or the wrinkles in her dress. Maybe Dad has food in his refrigerator that is past its "use by" date, or he isn't following the directions printed on his medication.

These are things you can do to help your loved one cope with diminished eyesight:

- Be prepared to comfort and reassure your care-receiver. Keep in mind that she may feel especially vulnerable if her eyesight is failing. She may isolate herself, and she will probably be very frightened at the thought of going blind.
- Make sure his house or apartment is well lit. Put

in higher-wattage light bulbs (still within the safe and recommended range for the lamp or fixture, of course). Have multiple light sources shining from different directions—a single bright light makes dark shadows.

- Light the top and the bottom of any staircases.
 - Make sure she has a night light. Leave the bathroom light or hall light on. Have a lamp within reach of the bed so that she can turn on the light before getting up. The "one touch" style of lamp is great for this.
 - Arrange the furniture in a pattern that makes it easy to get around. Once your loved one is familiar with the furniture's pattern, don't rearrange it.
 - If Dad is still driving, encourage him to stop.
 - If Mom's place is going to be repainted, use contrasting colors to help her distinguish between doors and walls.
 - Write down important information, such as emergency phone numbers and addresses, in large, thick print and post it.
 - Get a telephone with an oversized keypad.
 - Get a good lighted magnifying glass.
 - Look into getting large-print books and magazines and audiobooks.
 - The next time you set up an appointment for a vision test for your loved one, stay close by during the exam. The dark room and testing can be intimidating, especially if your care-receiver is also experiencing some hearing loss.
 - Be ready to provide the everyday support that can make such a difference. Offer her your arm as the two of you come to a curb. Read him the menu if the restaurant is dimly lit or the print is too small.
- Through it all, help your loved one never lose sight of the fact that the two of you are facing this challenge together. □

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A program of the

Friends of St. John the Caregiver.

For a free copy of "The Little Book of Caregiver Prayers," send a self-addressed stamped envelope to: FSJC, P.O. Box 320, Mountlake Terrace, WA 98043.