

Age Wise

The Family Caregiver's Guide to What to Expect as Your Parents Age



SILVER SOLUTIONS

Chapter 6

Senior Health Care: Six Steps to Better Medical Visits

If you've ever left a doctor's visit with more questions than answers—or felt like your aging parent's care was a never-ending game of medical ping-pong—you're not alone.

Our current healthcare system is structured to treat individual conditions—diabetes, heart disease, arthritis, depression—as if they exist in isolation. For older adults and their caregivers, this is problematic: most people over 65 live with three or more chronic conditions at once. These aren't separate problems—they interact in complex, sometimes conflicting ways. Unfortunately, the medical system often doesn't see it that way.

As we learned in our Age Wise interview with Dr. Mary Tinetti, a geriatrician at Yale School of Medicine and national leader in aging research:

“What's good for the disease may not be good for the patient.”

Said another way, focusing on individual conditions and bouncing from one specialist to another often misses the big picture. And with increasingly short appointment times—driven in part by insurance reimbursement rules—many older adults aren't getting the coordinated care they need.

That's where family caregivers come in. In this chapter, we'll help you create a plan to support your mom, dad, spouse, or any aging loved one you're caring for.

Why Caregivers Are Now the Quarterbacks

In an ideal world, a primary care doctor would coordinate everything. But as Dr. Tinetti explained, “We live far from an ideal world.” Most clinicians want to do the right thing—but they're under pressure to see 20–25 patients a day, document in real time, and follow single-disease guidelines.

This creates a major gap—and caregivers often fill it. You're not just a companion at appointments. You're the coordinator, translator, advocate, and decision guide—the one who helps ensure care decisions reflect the whole person, not just their lab results.

Step 1: Start With What Matters Most

The medical system is built around the question: “What’s the matter?” But Dr. Tinetti’s work invites a better one: “What matters most to you?”

Her initiative, *Patient Priorities Care*, helps older adults define personal goals—like walking without pain, having enough energy to socialize, or avoiding burdensome treatments—and then use those goals to guide every medical decision.

“If you go in knowing what your priorities are,” Dr. Tinetti said, “you’re much more likely to get clinicians to think that way.”

How to help your loved one define their priorities:

- Ask: “What would a good day look like for you?”
- Write down 1–2 real-life goals. (“I want to garden again this spring.”)
- Make them SMART: Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Realistic, Time-bound
- Use myhealthpriorities.org for step-by-step guidance

Step 2: Maximize Short Visits

Doctor visits are short—some last just 15 minutes. And much of that time may be spent on a computer screen, not on your loved one.

To make those minutes count:

- Bring a one-page summary with:
 - Diagnoses
 - Medications (including OTC and supplements)
 - Allergies
 - Recent hospitalizations or test results
- List your loved one’s top 1–2 health goals
- Write down your key questions in advance, ranked by priority


 Dr. Tinetti’s tip:

“It doesn’t happen in one visit. People aren’t used to thinking about what matters most. But when they do, it changes everything.”

Step 3: During the Appointment – Be the Extra Set of Ears

Attend appointments whenever you can. Your role is vital:

- Ask doctors to explain things in plain English
- Take notes (or ask to record with permission)
- Confirm any next steps: tests, referrals, medication changes

 After the visit:


- Summarize what happened in a shared health folder
- Share updates with other family members or providers

Step 4: Be Wary of Too Many Meds

Many older adults take multiple prescriptions—a situation called **polypharmacy**. While each medication may serve a purpose, combinations can interact in harmful ways—especially when prescribed by multiple specialists.

What to do:

- Use a pill organizer or digital reminder tool
- Ask for a full medication review at least once a year
- Be alert to sudden changes in balance, appetite, or mood
- Ask: “Is this still necessary?” for each prescription

 Remember: Treating everything can lead to overtreatment—and harm. As Dr. Tinetti said, “Trying to fix each little piece can make the whole system fall apart.”

Step 5: Navigating Hospital Stays and Discharge

Hospital stays are stressful—but the bigger risk often comes after discharge, when follow-up care is unclear.

To avoid complications:

- Confirm with your discharge planner who is responsible for follow-up care
- Get clear written instructions (and go over them verbally)
- Ask whether new medications replace or add to the current list

- Arrange for home care or rehab support before discharge

Step 6: When Memory or Cognition Affects Care

Cognitive decline—even if temporary—can affect how your loved one manages medications, communicates symptoms, and follows instructions.

If this applies to your loved one:

- Let providers know in advance
- Request extra time and written instructions
- Confirm a healthcare proxy is in place (and documented)

Final Thoughts: A System That's Still Catching Up

Despite advances in geriatric care, much of the medical system still lags behind. Health records remain siloed. Research still focuses on one disease at a time. Insurance rewards volume over thoughtful conversation.

But there is hope. Tools like artificial intelligence and better care models are emerging. In the meantime, **caregivers are the bridge**—bringing humanity, clarity, and coordination to a system that needs it most.

Key Takeaways

- The healthcare system treats diseases one by one—but older adults live with all of them at once
 - Appointment times are short—preparation makes the difference
 - Define and share personal health goals that matter to your loved one
 - Coordinate between providers, monitor medications, and manage transitions
 - You may be the most important person making sure everyone works from the same playbook
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Want to Hear Our Full Conversation with Dr. Tinetti?

Listen to Episode 40 of the Age Wise Podcast to learn how her mission to align care with what matters most can transform both treatment and trust.

 [Click here to listen](#) or find it on Apple Podcasts under Age Wise by Silver Solutions.