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THE SITUATION

Nearly 80 percent of people with Alzheimer's disease or a related dementia live at home and most want to stay there for as long as possible. As the disease progresses, however, the likelihood of falls and needing assistance with bathing, toileting and other activities threatens that independence. So keeping a person at home usually requires creating an environment that decreases safety hazards and increases the ability to manage daily needs. Driven by the nation's aging population and longer lifespans, home healthcare products have boomed into a billion dollar industry—one that is expected to rise steadily in the years ahead. With products and price points galore, for the consumer, the key is not just to buy, but to buy smart.

THE SOLUTION

Assess the environment. For the moment, observe if the person with dementia has difficulty with daily activities, such as getting out of bed, going to the toilet, or standing in the shower. Then, put yourself in your loved one's shoes and make a list of daily activities that may be problematic in the future.

Consult with an occupational therapist. Occupational therapists can assess a person's capabilities to participate in daily activities, as well as evaluate the home environment to suggest equipment and modifications that can promote independence.

Speak with a doctor. Talk with your loved one's physician about any necessary durable medical equipment, defined in general as reusable and medically necessary. While most supplies can be purchased without a prescription, some or all of the costs of certain durable equipment are covered by Medicare or private insurance if your doctor, nurse practitioner, clinical nurse specialist or physician assistant prescribes it. For example, if a person meets specific conditions, Medicare Part B and Medicare Advantage Plans cover equipment such as commodes, hospital beds, hydraulic lifts, walkers and wheelchairs; They do not cover items like bathtub seats, grab bars and raised toilet seats since they are not "medical in nature."

Choosing the Right Home Care Equipment

Research product options. The Internet provides a wealth of resources and Web sites to help consumers learn about products before purchasing them. This is also a good way to find out about renting or purchasing equipment, and making sure the price is right. AbleData, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education's National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, features a database on its Web site (www.abledata.com) and an information center (800.227.0216) with objective information on more than 40,000 assistive technology products and rehabilitation equipment.

Choose a reputable provider. Medical supply stores, pharmacies, home improvement centers and online sites sell homecare equipment. Get referrals from your doctor, friends or family. Some providers will let you rent products such as wheelchairs, hospital beds or shower benches before committing. Check whether a company has any complaints filed with the Better Business Bureau or State Consumer Protection Agency. A reputable provider should honor warranties and allow return of inferior or unsuitable equipment.

Check out customer service. When speaking with providers, ask if trained professionals will make home visits since some equipment such as seat lifts or power-operated wheelchairs may need size fitting, installation or maintenance. Find out how the customer service center operates, and who to contact if you need supplies delivered in an emergency.

Investigate used equipment. If you are buying pre-owned equipment, be sure to inspect it for safety, proper functioning and fit. To locate used equipment, check out stores and online retailers, as well as local care facilities and nonprofit organizations that service people with disabilities and may have received donated equipment to pass on to others.

—WRITTEN BY JOANA CASAS

PREPARE IN ADVANCE

Anticipate which products may be needed down the road and do your research now so that you can become an informed buyer prior to a health emergency or need that forces you to act in haste.