

# YOUR GOOD HEALTH

## Digital dilemma

When to talk to seniors about access to technology

Judith Graham

Kaiser Health News

At first, Dr. Robert Zorowitz thought his 83-year-old mother was confused. She couldn't remember passwords to accounts on her computer. She would call and say programs had stopped working.

But over time, Zorowitz realized his mother — a highly intelligent woman who was comfortable with technology — was showing early signs of dementia.

Increasingly, families will encounter similar concerns as older adults become reliant on computers, cellphones and tablets: With cognitive impairment, these devices become difficult to use and, in some cases, problematic.

Computer skills may deteriorate even "before (older adults) misplace keys, forget names or display other more classic signs of early dementia," Zorowitz wrote recently on a group email list for geriatricians. (He's based in New York City and senior medical director for Optum Inc., a health services company.)

"Deciding whether to block their access to their bank accounts, stocks and other online resources may present the same ethical dilemmas as taking away their car keys."

The emergence of this issue tracks the growing popularity of devices that let older adults communicate with friends and family via email, join interest groups on Facebook, visit virtually via Skype or FaceTime, and bank, shop, take courses or read publications online.

According to the Pew Research Center, 73% of adults 65 and older used the Internet in 2019, up from 43% in 2010. And 42% of older adults owned smartphones in 2017, the latest year for which data is available, up from 18% in 2013.

Already, some physicians are adapting to this new digital reality. At Johns Hopkins Medicine, Dr. Halima Amjad, an assistant professor of medicine, now asks older patients if they use a computer or smartphone and are having trouble such as forgetting passwords or getting locked out of accounts.

"If there's a notable change in how someone is using technology," she said, "we would proceed with a more in-depth cognitive evaluation."

At Rush University's Alzheimer's Disease Center in Chicago, neurologist Dr. Neelum Aggarwal finds that older adults are bringing up problems with technology as a "non-threatening way to talk about trouble with thinking."

"Instead of saying, 'I have issues with my memory,' people will say, 'I just can't figure out my smartphone' or 'I was trying to start that computer program and it took forever to get that done.'"

If the person previously used digital devices without difficulty, Aggarwal will try



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Pew Research Center

to identify the underlying problem.

When safety becomes an issue - say, for an older adult with dementia who's being approached by scammers on email — family members should first try counseling the person against giving out their Social Security or credit card information, said Cynthia Clyburn, a social worker in the neurology division at Penn Medicine in Philadelphia.

If that doesn't work, try to spend time together at the computer so you can monitor what's going on. "Make it a group activity," Clyburn said. If possible, create shared passwords so you have shared access.

But beware of appropriating someone's passwords and using them to check email or online bank or brokerage accounts. "Without consent, it's a federal crime to use an individual's password to access their accounts," said Catherine Seal, an elder-law attorney at Kirtland & Seal in Colorado Springs, Colo. Ideally, consent should be granted in writing.

More difficult, often, are situations faced by people with frontotemporal dementia (FTD), which affects a person's judgment, self-awareness and ability to assess risk.

Sally Balch Hurme's 75-year-old husband, Arthur, has FTD. Every day, this elder-law attorney and author struggles to keep him safe in a digital world full of threats.

What steps has she taken to manage the situation? With Arthur's permission, she unsubscribes him from accounts that send him emails and removes friends from his Facebook account. On his cellphone, she has installed a "parental control" app that blocks him from using it between midnight and 6 a.m. — hours when he was most likely to engage in online activities.



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