

# Two questions may reveal seniors' impending decline, study says

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Inability to climb steps seen as one red flag.

(HealthDay)—Mobility is a key indicator of healthy aging, and doctors should screen older patients for signs of physical decline, say the authors of a new review.

For the study, published Sept. 18 in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, the researchers analyzed studies published between 1985 and 2012 that examined mobility and aging.

"The review confirmed that increased physical activity and exercise are extremely important for healthy aging," Dr. Cynthia Brown, of the division of gerontology, geriatrics and [palliative care](#) at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, said in a university news release.

Mobility problems are often an early sign of impending [functional decline](#) in seniors, which can affect their ability to live independently, Brown said.

She recommended that primary care doctors ask all senior patients two questions:

- For health or physical reasons, do you have difficulty climbing up 10 steps or walking a quarter of a mile?
- Because of underlying health or physical reasons, have you modified the way you climb 10 steps or walk a quarter of a mile?

"Any modification of a task such as climbing 10 steps raises a red flag," Brown said. "Asking the right questions can tell a clinician a great deal about the level of mobility in their older patients."

If patients' answers suggest that they have [mobility problems](#), doctors should take appropriate measures, such as referring patients to physical therapy or prescribing appropriate mobility assistance devices, Brown advised.

"Mobility is one of the cornerstones of [healthy aging](#)," she said. "With an increasing older population in the United States, it is incumbent on us to find ways to help older Americans continue to live well and independently. The major barriers—lack of physical activity, obesity and smoking—are all [risk factors](#) that can be successfully overcome with appropriate treatment and assistance."

**More information:** The American Academy of Family Physicians outlines [good health habits at age 60 and beyond](#).

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