

# Some seniors entering long-term care homes too soon, says expert

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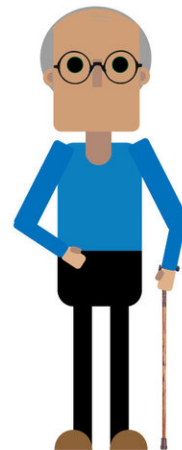
## The future of aging in Canada

Seniors will represent a **quarter** of the Canadian population by 2036.

**One in eight** seniors in Canada is 85 and older.

**One in three** people aged 85 and older live in nursing homes and senior residences.

Source: Statistics Canada



Credit: University of British Columbia

With seniors now outnumbering children in Canada, an increasing number of families are caring for aging loved ones. Often, this involves difficult decisions about whether to place an elderly relative or loved one in a care facility. UBC faculty of medicine's Dr. Roger Wong, the executive associate dean, education and clinical professor in the division of geriatric medicine, believes that some seniors are entering facilities

too soon. In a recent [TEDx talk](#), he argued technology can go a long way to helping seniors lead independent, healthy lives—even in the face of early dementia.

## **Why are seniors moving into facilities too soon?**

As a geriatrician, I have seen thousands of seniors and their loved ones over the years. People often ask, "Dr. Wong, my loved one has reached a certain age. Does that mean they should automatically be going into long-term care?" My answer is absolutely not. What I say is that age is a number. Life is more than a number.

Every person's story is different, and there are going to be situations when the right thing to do is to consider long-term care. But moving into long-term care is always a significant life change. There's a loss of autonomy, a loss of familiarity, and even a loss of memories. Many times, seniors have lived in the same place for many, many years. It could be the home where they raised their family, where they saw children or even grandchildren being born. To many of them, moving out of that environment is a significant loss, and people can grieve over that. Inevitably, families and loved ones may feel guilty when seniors move into long-term care.

## **Can seniors with dementia really live independently at home?**

By and large, someone with early dementia or newly diagnosed dementia does not need to move into a care facility, at least not right away. I think people make assumptions about dementia, and there is a negative stigma associated with it, particularly with Alzheimer's disease. We need to remember that there are things we can do that can help seniors stay safe and longer at home, including those who are living with [early dementia](#).

In addition to safety-proofing the home to avoid falls, technology such as smartphones and smart watches can also be very helpful. They can provide medication reminders, and can act as a fall detector, sending a signal if someone has an impact on the floor. The GPS tracking function on a smartphone or smart watch can be helpful for those who are at risk of wandering.



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Home appliances can also be connected through the Internet of Things, which sends information about everyday devices and appliances wirelessly to a computer or smartphone, allowing family members or caregivers to check in virtually. They can see, for instance, if the electric

stove is turned off, if the doors are locked at night, or who might be knocking at the door. Of course, you have to be mindful of privacy issues, but a lot of things are now possible, even at great distances.

## **What function can social media play in seniors' lives?**

There's a lot of literature about the negative effects of social isolation and loneliness on health. For seniors, being socially isolated can be as harmful to their health as smoking; it can shave years off their life expectancy. Technology and social media can help with this.

As an example, take mealtime, which traditionally is a very sociable time. But for seniors who live alone, they may be quite lonely during mealtime. Now, you can use an application to connect [family members](#) face-to-face around the world together, virtually, and have a meal together.

## **Apart from technology, what precautions can be taken to help an aging loved one remain at home longer?**

I try to impress on people that there are straightforward and simple things that we can do to help maintain safety. For example, falls are very common among the elderly, but they don't have to be a normal part of aging. They can be prevented with some simple steps.

Look at whether there are loose rugs or floor mats, which can catch on a foot or cause slips. Consider whether the flooring is hardwood or carpeted, because a walking aid, like a walker, will be difficult to manoeuvre across thick carpeting. In the bathroom, are there raised toilet seats, and grab bars? These are simple, yet important things that can make a big difference.

Above all, it is important to show compassion. Embrace technology before it is too late, but remember, technology cannot replace a real hug.

Provided by University of British Columbia

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