

# Senior Independence Means Living Life on Your Terms



*“There are many programs to assist seniors, but it is really about people helping people.”*

*– Dr. Jonathan Lowenthal*

According to the Maryland Department on Aging, in 2015, more than 18,000 residents of Calvert County were over the age of 60. In 2030, that number is expected to increase 63 percent to nearly 30,000 residents.

Remaining independent as one ages is the number one concern for seniors—with the goal being to stay in their own homes. We asked Calvert Internal Medicine Group’s geriatric specialist Dr. Jonathan Lowenthal for advice on what actions individuals can take to maintain their independence.

*There are two very obvious things that people need in order to be independent: mental capacity and physical capacity.*

## Mental Capacity

“The mental capacity needed for independence is, for most of us, out of our control. We can develop dementia, or we can develop other health issues that affect mental capacity. Unless affected by alcoholism or substance abuse, our mental capacity to live independently is not really under our control,” said Dr. Lowenthal.

The difference between age-related memory loss and forms of dementia in part, relates to an individual’s capacity and awareness of problems with memory. In the former, individuals are aware and tend to worry about memory; in the latter one lacks insight of the problem.

“If, as an adult, you can’t remember why you walked into a room, or you lose your keys, those things are not usually indicative of dementia,” said Dr. Lowenthal, adding, “with dementia, a person can get very angry if a family member brings up problems with memory.” When a patient doesn’t sense they have a memory problem, it is more difficult because it is usually a more serious problem.

*A meaningful connection to the people who live nearby or sense of community is crucial in determining a senior’s ability to remain independent and stay in their home.*

According to Dr. Lowenthal, there are four pillars when it comes to fitness:

- 1 Cardiovascular Fitness.** You don’t have to run a marathon, but you have to be able to walk, ride a bicycle or garden or do something where your heart rate goes up. You need to do physical activity that stimulates your heart.
- 2 Muscle Strength.** People don’t concentrate on it enough, but it is equally important. If your muscles become weak, you are more apt to fall. More than 30 percent of all adults over the age of 65 fall in a given year, and falls can be catastrophic.
- 3 Flexibility.** Stretching and keeping muscles limber is important. Our bodies can’t make more muscle after the age of around 40, so protecting the muscles we have and keeping them flexible is important.
- 4 Balance.** Most people don’t talk about balance training, but it is vital. When people fall it is usually due to losing their balance. As we age, we lose our ability to navigate tight areas or climb or move around quickly—especially in the dark.



*Strength training, such as working with light, hand-held weights, helps to keep muscles strong. To learn more about exercise classes such as Fit For Life and Yoga, visit [CalvertHealthMedicine.org](http://CalvertHealthMedicine.org).*

## Physical Capacity

Although many people have limitations or disabilities as we age, in most cases we have some control of our physical capacity.

“You really have to have a physical capability in order to live independently, and in order to have the physical capability the human body has to stay active,” said Dr. Lowenthal. “I tell all of my patients, even if they have a disability of some kind, they will have the ability to remain physically fit.”

## Transportation

The 2020 Calvert County Health Needs Assessment indicated the Baby Boomer generation is the largest demographic in the county with nearly 50 percent of those surveyed for the assessment noting transportation for seniors is a top community issue.

“As physicians we cannot tell a patient ‘You cannot drive,’” said Dr. Lowenthal. Physicians can make recommendations, but if someone refuses to hang up their keys, and there is no family around or anyone to help prevent them from driving, the only recourse is to contact the motor vehicle administration to assess a person’s ability to drive.

“We’ve all seen an elderly driver do certain things that make you cringe, but there are a lot of young people who do things that make you cringe, too,” said Dr. Lowenthal.

## Community

Living independently also requires some level of community or family support, which can be a problem for people who live in a rural area. According to Pew research, older people are more likely to live alone in the U.S. than elsewhere in the world. Nearly 30 percent of adults in the U.S., age 60 and older live alone, nearly half in that age group share a home with only one other person—a partner or a spouse. Even before the pandemic, loneliness among seniors was a problem.

Loneliness affects up to 60 percent of older Americans and puts millions of Americans age 50 and over at risk of poor health from prolonged loneliness, according to a recent Harvard study.

“Loneliness has become a huge problem for the elderly. When you are 80 years old and you live by yourself and you can’t get out, your quality of life and health really suffers,” said Dr. Lowenthal.

“People can live independently if they have lost a little bit of memory, a little bit of mobility or a little bit of hearing or a little bit of vision, but if they have lost a lot of all of those, plus they have no financial resources, and they have no community or family support, that’s when things start to fall apart pretty rapidly,” said Dr. Lowenthal. “Maintaining your cardiovascular health, your strength, balance and social connections will not only aid seniors in living independently, but ensure a greater quality of life.”

## MEET THE DOCTOR

**Jonathan D. Lowenthal, MD,** is board-certified in internal medicine and geriatric medicine with Calvert Internal Medicine Group in Prince Frederick. For more information on Dr. Lowenthal or any of the physicians affiliated with CalvertHealth, go to: [CalvertHealthMedicine.org](http://CalvertHealthMedicine.org).

