

Savvy Senior: Meal services happy to cater to seniors who don't cook

By JIM MILLER

DEAR SAVVY SENIOR: I would like to find some [easy and healthy meal-service options for my elderly parents](#), who have a hard time getting around. My mom just had her hip replaced, which is keeping her from cooking, and dad is a disaster in the kitchen. What can you tell us? -- Hungry and Helpless

DEAR HUNGRY: Depending on where your parents live, there are various meal-service options for homebound seniors who can't, or don't, cook anymore. Here are several to check into.

A good starting point is to find out if there's a home-delivery meal program in your parents' area. Meals on Wheels is the largest program that most people are familiar with, but many communities offer senior meal-delivery programs sponsored by other organizations that go by different names. Be sure you check into all possibilities. The Area Agency on Aging -- call 800-677-1116 to get the number or visit www.eldercare.gov -- near your parents can tell you what's available, or you can do a search at www.mealcall.org.

Most home-delivered meal programs across the United States deliver hot meals, daily or several times a week, usually around the lunch hour, to seniors over age 60 who have problems preparing meals for themselves, as well as those with disabilities. Weekend meals, usually frozen, may also be available, along with special diets -- diabetic, low-sodium, kosher, etc. Most of these programs typically charge a small fee, usually between \$2 and \$6, or request a donation, while some may be free to low-income seniors.

In addition to home-delivered meals, you should also look into congregate meal programs. Many communities offer free or low-cost hot meals in a group setting, often near senior centers, schools, churches and housing projects for older adults. Some facilities even offer transportation to the sites.

Another popular option for non-cooking seniors with a bigger budget is to hire a personal chef from time to time. A personal chef can provide your parents with a do-it-all service that will help plan their meals according to their tastes and needs, do the grocery shopping, and prepare them several weeks' worth (or more) of tasty meals in their home, which they can freeze and eat when they please. Or, they can prepare food in their own kitchen and deliver it. Chef's fees range between \$200 and \$300 plus groceries. To find a personal chef, visit the American Personal & Private Chef Association at www.personalchef.com, where you can do a search by state, or call 800-644-8389.

If that seems too pricey, a less expensive way to go is to hire an occasional homemaker or home helper who will shop for groceries and cook. This type of service typically costs about \$10 to \$15 per hour. The area aging agency, local churches, friends, newspaper ads or even craigslist.org are all good sources to help you find someone, or check the Yellow Pages under "home care services."

Another convenient option is to purchase your parents prepared frozen meals online, and have them delivered to their house. While there are lots of companies that sell frozen meals, MagicKitchen.com (magickitchen.com, 877-516-2442) is a top option that caters to the dietary needs of seniors. It offers a wide variety of delicious and nutritious meals, with prices ranging between \$8 and \$12 per meal. Schwan's (schwans.com, 888-724-9267), DineWise (dinewise.com, 800-749-1170) and FamilyChef (familychef.com, 888-612-9264) also offer tasty home meal-delivery services as well. A cheaper alternative is to go to your local grocery store and pick up some Healthy Choice (healthychoice.com), Kashi (kashi.com) or Lean Cuisine (leancuisine.com) dinners or low-sodium canned soups.