

Living with Multiple Health Problems: *What Older Adults Should Know*

As we continue to lead longer lives, we become more likely to develop different kinds of health problems. One challenge older adults in particular are likely to face is living with multiple health problems. More than half of all adults 65 and older have three or more ongoing medical problems, such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer, or arthritis. Figuring out the best course of treatment for multiple health problems can be tricky. For example, prescribing medications for a patient with multiple health problems is more complicated than it is when the patient has one health problem, because a drug that may be useful in treating one health problem may make another worse. That is why both patients and healthcare providers have a role to play in figuring out the best solution to these problems. Here are some tips for working with your healthcare provider when you have several chronic health problems:

Get as much information about treatment options as possible

You should work with your healthcare provider to understand all of your options for care and take an active role in deciding what kind of care you would like. For example, you should ask your provider to tell you how long each treatment option may take to work because some treatments may take longer than others to show benefits.

You should also decide if you want to make all of your care decisions on your own or include others in the decision-making process. These can include spouses, family members, or friends. And you should always let your healthcare providers know right away if you have questions or concerns, want to stop treatment, or want try something new.

Make sure your healthcare provider understands your priorities for care

Decide what treatment outcomes are important to you. For example, you may want to remain as independent as you can for as long as possible. Because of this, you may prefer a treatment with fewer side effects, even if this treatment may not prolong your life as long as other treatments. This is just one example—you should ask your healthcare provider how different treatment options will affect the aspects of your life that are most important to you, such as your level of independence, stamina, or pain.

Ask questions about “trade-offs” between benefits and risks of treatments

Most medications and other treatments have both benefits and risks. Talk with your healthcare provider about possible benefits of each treatment, as well as possible drawbacks such as increased risks of disability, new health problems, and poorer quality of life. Understanding all of the pros and cons of each treatment will help you decide which option is best for you.

Let your healthcare professional know immediately if a treatment doesn't seem to be working or is causing problems

Since there isn't a lot of research examining how older adults with complex health problems respond to treatments, your healthcare provider may not be able to predict exactly how a treatment will affect you. Because of this, it's very important for you or your caregiver to tell your healthcare provider—right away—if a treatment doesn't seem to be working or is causing side effects.

Speak up if your treatment plan is too complicated to manage

Studies have found that the more complicated treatment instructions are, the more likely patients are to stop following them. Let your healthcare provider know if your treatment becomes too complicated or difficult for you to follow. And make sure you understand all instructions before you leave your provider's office. Ask them to work with you to make instructions as simple and easy-to-follow as possible.

Make the most of treatments that cause few or no side effects

Your healthcare providers should make the most important and effective treatments the highest priority. Your treatment plan should fit your needs and preferences, while getting you the most benefits and least amount of risks. Among other things, your providers should be able to tell you about non-medication treatment options—and how to use those when possible—to avoid potentially dangerous interactions between medications as well as other potential side effects. Ask your healthcare provider if there are non-medication options for at least some of your symptoms.

For Caregivers: If you help someone make healthcare decisions—or if you make healthcare decisions for someone who is unable to make their own—you should keep these same tips in mind as you work with their healthcare providers.

Reflect on conversations you've had with the person you care for about their wishes and opinions, and consider all of the potential benefits and burdens of the options presented to you.