

A Guide to Geriatric Syndromes

Americans are continuing to live longer and healthier lives. As we age, we become more likely to develop different kinds of health problems. These are called geriatric syndromes, which are problems that usually have more than one cause and involve many parts of the body. Doctors called geriatricians—who have advanced training in the care of older adults—and other geriatrics healthcare professionals can play an important role in diagnosing and managing these syndromes.

There are many treatments available for these conditions that can help you maintain your independence and quality of life. For more information on the individual conditions visit HealthinAging.org.

Geriatric Syndrome

BLADDER CONTROL PROBLEMS

Lack of bladder control, or “urinary incontinence,” is an embarrassing topic. Please know that you are not alone! Urinary incontinence can lead to problems such as falls, depression, and isolation.

SLEEP PROBLEMS

Sleep problems can affect your quality of life and can contribute to falls, injuries, and other health problems.

DELIRIUM

Many older adults who go to the Emergency Room or are admitted to the hospital develop delirium. Delirium is a state of sudden confusion.

What Should You Do?

In most cases, incontinence can be cured or greatly improved with treatment. So don't hesitate to tell your healthcare provider if you have bladder control problems.

If you have trouble sleeping at night or feel sleepy during the day, tell your healthcare provider so he or she can identify the type of sleep problem you have.

Delirium is a medical emergency, similar to chest pain. Make sure that you and your friends and family know the signs of delirium (see HealthinAging.org) and seek medical attention right away at the first sign of any sudden changes in mental function.

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What Should You Do?

DEMENTIA

Dementia, most simply, is a memory problem significant enough to affect your ability to carry out your usual tasks. While the most common cause is Alzheimer's Disease, there are many other types.

Various tests can help determine whether you or someone you care for might have dementia and what type it might be. If so, there are treatments that can improve function and slow down the disease.

FALLS

Falls are a leading cause of serious injury in older people. There are many risk factors for falling, including safety hazards in the home, medication side effects, walking and vision problems, dizziness, arthritis, weakness, and malnutrition. Like other geriatric syndromes, falls usually have more than one cause.

Tell your healthcare provider immediately if you have fallen. He or she will look into what caused your fall and suggest steps to prevent future falls. There are many treatments, such as exercise and physical therapy, that can help improve your gait and walking and prevent falls.

OSTEOPOROSIS

Osteoporosis, or "thinning bones," is a condition that makes the bones of older adults more fragile and easy to break.

Women 65 and older, and men over age 70, should get a bone mass density (BMD) test. Increased calcium and vitamin D intake, strength training exercises, and weight-bearing exercises such as walking are important to keeping your bones healthy. Your healthcare provider may also recommend medications or other treatments.

WEIGHT LOSS

Weight loss is a very common problem in older adults. Weight loss can be caused by the diminished sense of taste that comes with aging, or it can be a suggestion of an underlying serious medical problem. No matter the cause, weight loss can lead to other problems, such as weakness, falls, and bone disorders.

Your healthcare provider should weigh you each time you visit and check for any changes. Also, be sure to let your healthcare provider know if you have any changes in your weight or appetite.