

Common Health Problems For Older Adults

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Many health problems are common with aging but they are **not** a normal part of it. Common problems of aging may lead to a loss of independence in doing your activities of daily living.

Common problems of aging include:

- pain
- weak muscles and brittle bones
- falling
- constipation
- urinary incontinence
- urinary tract infections (UTIs)
- sleep problems
- poor nutrition
- skin problems
- vision problems and low vision
- hearing problems
- depression
- anxiety
- delirium
- dementia.

Did You Know?

Staying physically, mentally and socially active can help slow, treat and prevent these common problems of aging.

Pain

Pain can come on suddenly (acute) or last a long time (chronic). It can affect every part of your life: eating, sleeping, work, interests and relationships. It can cause you to be stressed, depressed, tired or angry.

No two people feel pain in the same ways. Pain that is intense to one person may be mild to another. You are the only one who knows where and how severe your pain is.

You have a key role in managing your pain. If you have pain, talk with your health care provider. He or she will work with you to manage your pain. Treatment options may include:

- physical activity
- massage therapy
- taking a bath or shower
- breathing and relaxation
- changes to your environment (dimming the lights, closing the curtains, adjusting the temperature)

Did You Know?

Pain medicines can include over-the-counter and prescription medicines. Long-term use of either type can cause side effects. Be sure to tell your health care provider about all of the pain medicines you are taking.

- heat or cold packs
- changing body positions
- rest
- medicines (pills, creams, patches).

Your health care provider can help you create a plan to manage your pain using some of these treatments.

Important

If you have severe pain, your health care provider may prescribe an opioid medicine to treat your pain. While this medicine can help manage pain, it also has risks. Risks include:

- decreased coordination
- falls
- confusion
- overuse: The longer you take opioids, the more your body gets used to them (known as tolerance). This means:
 - they may not work as well
 - you may have more side effects when you stop taking them.
- addiction.

Weak Muscles and Brittle Bones

Older adults lose muscle mass and bone density as they age. This causes weakness and can lead to osteoporosis, a disease that causes bones to become brittle and break easily.

It is important to resume or start an exercise program as you are able. Strength (resistance) training is best. Your health care provider may want you to see a physical therapist to help you create an exercise plan that is right for you. Good nutrition is also important. Make sure to eat enough protein, calcium and vitamin D-rich foods.

Falling

It is important to always tell your health care provider when you have fallen (or almost fallen). Keeping it a secret and limiting your activity because you are afraid of falling will only increase your risk of falling again. Your primary care provider and care circle (family members, friends or other close to you) can help you get the services you need to prevent another fall.

Constipation

Constipation is when you have:

- to strain to have a bowel movement
- hard stools
- not had a bowel movement for more than 3 days.

It can be caused by:

- decreased physical activity
- not drinking enough liquids
- changes in eating habits
- medicines.

Important

You should have a bowel movement every 2 to 3 days. Talk with your health care provider if you have not had a bowel movement for 3 days.

Did You Know?

Constipation can cause abdominal pain, bloating, upset stomach (nausea), decreased appetite and stool leakage.

Stool leakage can be caused by muscle problems. For some, a physical therapy program focused on the pelvic floor muscles can help. Talk with your health care provider about whether physical therapy can help you.

You can help prevent or manage constipation by doing the following:

- Drink four to six 8-ounce glasses of liquids each day (unless your health care provider gives you other instructions). Water is best.
- Eat high-fiber foods such as whole-grain bread, bran cereals, fresh fruit and vegetables.
- Be as active as you can each day. Walking will help.
- Try to have a bowel movement when you feel the urge. Do not ignore the urge. Try to set aside some time after breakfast or dinner to sit on the toilet.
- If you are taking prescription pain medicine, try to take less if possible. Follow your health care provider's instructions for taking pain medicine.

Important

It is common for prescription pain medicines to cause constipation. Taking a stool softener alone may not provide relief. You may need to take a stimulant laxative too.

Common products to manage constipation include:

- stimulant laxatives. These cause the colon to have a bowel movement. This is the best choice when your constipation is caused by a prescription pain medicine. Examples include senna (Senokot®) and bisacodyl (Dulcolax®, Correctol®). Follow package directions.
- stool softeners. These add moisture to the stools to make the stool softer and easier to pass. These may not be enough to prevent constipation while you are taking a prescription pain medicine. An example is docusate (Colace®) or polyethylene glycol (MiraLAX®). Follow package directions.
- fiber supplements. These can add bulk to the loose stools and soften hard stools. Examples include psyllium (Metamucil®), wheat dextrin (Benefiber®) and methylcellulose (Citrucel®).

Your health care provider may recommend one or more of these if needed.

Important

Long-term use of stimulant laxatives can cause your bowels to stop working normally and may cause you to be dependent on them.

Urinary Incontinence

Urinary incontinence means that you cannot always hold your urine.

You may have dribbling or leakage before or after using the bathroom or constant, unpredictable leakage.

There are several ways to manage incontinence.

- **Planned toileting:** You should try to urinate every 2 to 3 hours even if you do not feel the urge to go.
- **Adult incontinence pads:** Wearing a pad will provide protection against leakage or accidents.
- **Consuming less caffeine:** Beverages containing caffeine (coffee, tea, many sodas) can increase your urge to go and how often you need to go.
- **Medicines:** Your health care provider can work with you to determine if you need to take a medicine to manage incontinence.
- **Exercise:** Your health care provider may give you instructions for exercises that can help too!

Did You Know?

Urine leakage can be caused by muscle problems. Constipation can also lead to leakage of urine and stool. For some, a physical therapy program focused on the pelvic floor muscles can help. Talk with your health care provider about whether physical therapy can help you.

Urinary Tract Infections (UTIs)

A urinary tract infection can affect your kidneys, bladder or urethra (tube from your bladder to the outside of your body). Other names for this include bladder infection, cystitis and UTI.

Symptoms of a UTI may include:

- feeling the urge to urinate more often or that you cannot empty your bladder completely
- new or worsening problems with holding your urine
- burning or pain while urinating
- new or increased confusion
- weakness
- falls.

Talk with your health care provider if you are having any of these symptoms.

Did You Know?

A recurrent UTI is when you have more than three UTIs in 1 year.

Recurrent UTIs may be related to urinary incontinence or constipation. In women, it may also be caused by a change in your vaginal bacteria, a loss of estrogen or both.

You can do the following to help prevent a UTI:

- Empty your bladder every 2 to 3 hours.
Do not hold urine for long periods of time.
- Drink at least four to six 8-ounce glasses of water each day.
- After a bowel movement, wipe your perineal area from front to back, using each tissue only once (women only). Consider using a moist wipe. Follow package directions for throwing the wipe away.
- Empty your bladder before and after having sex.
- Change your underwear, incontinence pads and pantyhose at least once each day or whenever soiled.
- Shower at least two times a week. Talk with your health care provider for instructions if you are not able to shower.
- Take all of the antibiotic pills (if prescribed) as directed by your health care provider, even if you are feeling well.

Talk with your health care provider about your best options for preventing and treating a UTI.

Sleep Problems

As you age, you may discover your sleep changes. You may have trouble falling asleep, staying asleep or feel less rested after waking up.

Sleep is important to your overall health. Talk with your health care provider about your regular sleep routine. Make sure to tell him or her if you are having problems sleeping well.

Important

Sleep medicines (including over-the-counter and prescription) can have side effects. This may include:

- falls
- confusion
- morning sleepiness.

Make sure to tell your health care provider if you take medicine to help you sleep.

Here are some things you can do to help you sleep well:

- Go to bed and wake up at about the same time each day.
- Stay active during the day. Physical activity will help you sleep well at night.
- Do not take long naps during the day. This can make you more tired and prevent you from sleeping well at night.
- Do a quiet activity before bedtime to promote sleep such as reading, journaling, meditating or praying.
- Talk with your health care provider if:
 - you are waking up more than two times during the night to go to the bathroom
 - thoughts are keeping you up at night
 - pain is preventing you from getting restful sleep.

Poor Nutrition

Good nutrition (including drinking enough water) is essential for a healthy body. Eating healthful meals and snacks will help you maintain or increase your strength, recover well and feel your best.

You may need to follow a special diet if you have health problems. Talk with your health care provider for special instructions.

Important: Talk with your health care provider if you have any issues that affect your ability to eat healthy. This includes if you:

- feel less hungry (decreased appetite)
- are losing weight
- have mouth sores, dry mouth or dentures that do not fit well
- feel weak
- have problems chewing, swallowing or both
- are not able to go grocery shopping
- do not have enough money to buy food
- are not able to prepare meals and snacks.

Did You Know?

Some medicines can cause dry mouth. Dry mouth can also occur naturally as you age.

Talk with your health care provider if you have dry mouth.

It is important to work with your health care provider to find the root cause of and treat the problem.

Skin Problems

As you age, you may discover changes in your skin. You may have problems with one or more of the following:

- dryness
- bruising
- easily torn or injured (frail) skin
- bedsores (pressure ulcers).

If you stay in a bed, chair or wheelchair for long periods of time, you are at a greater risk for developing skin problems. Tell your health care provider if you notice any dryness, bruising, injury or painful areas on your body.

It is important that you take care of your skin. This includes:

- looking at your skin every day for any changes. If you have a medical device, look at the skin around it.
- using pads or briefs to absorb urine. Change them when wet. This will prevent rashes, UTIs and other skin problems.
- taking 2 to 3 showers each week. Taking a sponge bath in between showers can help keep your skin healthy.
 - Use warm water (not hot). Hot water dries out the skin and can damage sensitive skin.
 - Use soaps labeled “for sensitive skin.”
 - Rinse well (especially if taking a sponge bath) and make sure to dry between your toes and in skin folds.
- applying barrier cream or ointment (if you have incontinence) to protect your skin from urine and stool.
- applying lotion or moisturizer to prevent dry skin. Avoid using lotion on areas that stay moist or wet from body fluids. (If you have diabetes, do not put lotion between your toes.)

Did You Know?

Many scented lotions contain alcohol, which dries out your skin. Look for products without alcohol listed as one of the first three ingredients on the label.

Vision Problems and Low Vision

As you age, you may notice changes in your vision. Some changes are a normal part of aging such as not being able to read small print on a restaurant menu.

Having low vision can cause you to have trouble with your activities of daily living such as cooking, sewing, reading, writing, shopping and driving. Low vision can also increase your risk for falls.

If you are having trouble seeing well, talk with your health care provider. Together, you can decide the best treatment options and resources for you.

Here are some tips for healthy eyes:

- Schedule an eye exam each year.
- Wear sunglasses when you are in the sun.
- Wear protective eyewear such as safety goggles or glasses (during sports, woodworking).
- Do not use tobacco.
- Give your eyes a rest. If you spend a lot of time at the computer or focusing on any one thing, you sometimes forget to blink and your eyes can get tired.
 - Try the 20-20-20 rule: Every 20 minutes, look away about 20 feet in front of you for 20 seconds. This can help reduce eyestrain.

Did You Know?

If you have vision problems there are special tools (large-print reading materials, magnifying aids, electronic reading machines) you can use to help you do your everyday tasks.

Hearing Problems

As you age, you may notice changes in your hearing. Significant hearing loss may lead to one or more of the following:

■ **isolation:**

You may stop attending social events or gatherings (movies, playing cards, getting together with friends for coffee) because you have trouble hearing in group activities. You may also stay home to avoid the embarrassment of asking others to repeat themselves.

■ **increased risk for injury or harm:**

You may be unable to hear safety alarms, the doorbell or the telephone, which can help to keep you safe.

It is also important to hear well enough to understand instructions given to you by your health care provider at appointments. It is OK to tell him or her if you do not understand. Written materials can be provided if needed.

Did You Know?

Changes in your vision or hearing can cause you to avoid social situations and gatherings. This can lead to feelings of isolation and depression.

Talk with your health care provider if vision or hearing problems are interfering with your activities of daily living.

■ **depression:**

Depression can include feelings of loneliness, isolation, grief, hopelessness, worthlessness or even thoughts of suicide.

It is important to tell your health care provider if you are having problems hearing. Together, you can determine what strategies (asking others to speak into the “best” ear, reading or writing, reducing background noise) work best for you.

Here are some tips for managing hearing loss:

- Talk with your health care provider if you notice changes in your hearing.
- Wear your hearing aids every day. If you are having problems with your hearing aids, talk with your hearing specialist (audiologist or hearing aid provider) to discuss your options.
- Wear hearing protection such as earplugs when you are around loud noises (lawn mower, concerts, sporting events).
- Give your ears a rest. Try to alternate between quiet and loud activities.

Depression

Depression is a serious health problem. Symptoms of depression can be mild to severe, lasting for a short time (days, weeks) or a long time (months, years). Symptoms of depression may include:

- having sad, anxious or “empty” feelings
- feeling “down” or “blue” for more than a few days
- feeling negative
- feeling irritable or restless
- feeling guilty, worthless, helpless or all three
- losing interest in activities or hobbies you once enjoyed
- feeling tired or having less energy than usual
- having trouble concentrating or making decisions
- having memory problems
- trouble falling asleep, waking up early or sleeping too much
- having changes in appetite and weight
- dizziness
- shortness of breath
- having aches and pains, headaches, cramps or digestive problems that do not go away with treatment
- thoughts of harming yourself or suicide.

There is no single cause for depression. Having a family history of depression, stress from life changes, medical problems or a combination of many things can lead to depression.

Depression can affect every part of your life. It can even affect:

- how often you become ill
- how well you are able to manage a health problem
- how well you heal from a major illness.

It is important to tell your health care provider if you are experiencing any symptoms of depression.

Depression can be treated just like any other medical problem (condition) such as diabetes or high blood pressure.

Did You Know?

Many older adults think they are too old to have depression or believe depression is a sign of weakness. This is not true. Depression is a medical problem that can be treated just like any other medical problem.

Here are some things you can try to help manage your depression:

- Try to spend time with other people and let others help you.
- Continue to participate in events or activities you enjoy. If a health problem (low vision, hearing problems, trouble walking) prevents you from going to events or activities, talk with your health care provider about ways he or she can help.
- Exercise regularly.
- Set realistic goals for yourself and break up large tasks into smaller ones. Set priorities and do what you can when you are able.
- Expect that your mood will improve slowly. You will not suddenly “snap out” of depression.
- Avoid making important decisions until you feel better.
- Keep a journal of your progress.
- Think about joining a support group.
- Limit your use of alcohol and other substances. Depression may lead you to drink alcohol, smoke more or take other drugs that will make you feel worse.

Your health care provider may also recommend you talk with a mental health care provider, take medicine(s) or both. Follow any instructions he or she gives you.

Anxiety

Anxiety can be described as nervousness, worry, dread or not being able to put things out of your mind. Symptoms of anxiety include:

- rapid heart rate, shortness of breath or both
- feeling a tightness in your chest
- feeling a lump in your throat
- trouble swallowing
- dizziness
- trouble falling asleep, waking up early or sleeping too much.

Some anxiety is normal and even necessary. Having a family history of anxiety, stress from life changes, medical problems or a combination of many factors can lead to feelings of anxiety.

Tell your health care provider if you have any symptoms of anxiety.

Important

You need to get help when you have physical symptoms of anxiety that keep you from feeling healthy and affect your activities of daily living.

Here are some things you can try to help manage your anxiety:

- Learn and practice deep breathing, meditation or guided imagery.
- Exercise (yoga, tai chi, walking).
- Use aromatherapy.
- Do hobbies you enjoy (listen to music, play cards, paint).
- Spend time outside.
- Cut back or stop drinking beverages that have caffeine or alcohol.

Your health care provider may also recommend you talk with a mental health care provider, take medicine(s) or both. Follow any instructions he or she gives you.

Delirium

Delirium is a sudden confusion that happens over a few hours or days, and can last for weeks or months. Often, it happens with an illness or hospital stay. It can affect your behaviors, thinking, attention or speech. These changes can be upsetting to you and your care circle.

Signs of delirium can come and go, and can change quickly. Your care circle may be the first to recognize these changes and should tell your health care provider about them right away. The chart on the next page lists some signs and examples of delirium.

Important

While you are recovering from delirium, it is important to have a member of your care circle stay with you.

Signs	Examples
New memory problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Forgetting where you are or why you are there, or both ■ Forgetting instructions you just received
Thinking and speech problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Not being able to focus or follow a conversation ■ Saying things that do not make sense ■ Talking slower or faster than usual
Behavior changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Irritability that may include yelling ■ Refusing to follow instructions ■ Being quieter or louder than usual
Sleep problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Sleeping too much or too little ■ Being unable to fall or stay asleep ■ Mixing up your days or nights
Other changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Seeing bugs or people who are not there ■ Hearing voices or music that is not there ■ Not trusting others or accusing others of trying to hurt you

Delirium is a medical problem that can have many causes. You are at a higher risk for delirium if you:

- are over 65 years old
- have a history of delirium, sudden (acute) confusion or dementia
- have problems seeing or hearing
- have more than one health problem.

There are several things you can do to help prevent delirium. This includes making sure you are:

- eating well and drinking enough liquids (staying hydrated)
- sleeping well during the night and staying on a consistent sleep schedule
- getting enough physical activity
- doing activities to challenge your mind such as puzzles, word searches or reading
- taking your medicines correctly and consistently
- staying connected with your family and friends
- surrounded by familiar objects or other belongings that make you more comfortable (glasses, hearing aids, blanket, photos, address book, calendar).

If you have delirium, your care circle can do the following to help you. This may include:

- using a calm, soothing and gentle voice
- giving reminders about the day, time and situation
- giving simple instructions focused on one task at a time
- limiting the number of visitors at one time
- limiting the length of time visitors stay
- massaging hands, feet, back or shoulders
- creating a simple, daily schedule with meal times, rest and activities
- making sure a member of your care circle is available to provide in-person support 24 hours a day or as needed. A familiar face can be calming and comforting.

Your care circle should watch for new or worsening signs of delirium. It is important that you talk with your health care provider about this.

Dementia

Dementia is not the same as delirium. Dementia is a general term for problems with memory or thinking that affect your life.

There are many different types of dementia. The most common type is Alzheimer's disease. The following chart lists some signs and examples of dementia.

Important

The person with dementia will not always notice signs of dementia. It is important for your care circle to tell your health care provider about any changes he or she notices.

Signs	Examples
Memory problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Forgetting important things that recently happened ■ Forgetting important dates such as a birthday ■ Repeating questions or stories
Thinking and speech problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Trouble learning new things ■ Using the wrong words or vague words ■ Taking longer to do simple tasks or not being able to complete tasks ■ Having trouble with math (balancing checkbook, following recipes) ■ Getting lost ■ Having poor judgement (money, safety, self-care, hygiene)
Behavior changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Losing interest in things or hobbies you once enjoyed ■ Avoiding social activities ■ Repeatedly losing things or putting things in wrong places

Signs	Examples
Sleep problems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Mixing up your days or nights ■ Waking up frequently or doing activities during the night (wandering, searching for things, stacking items)
Other changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Having trouble judging distance ■ Having trouble reading ■ Being more irritable, angry or annoyed ■ Feeling sad, depressed or hopeless

Just because you have one or more of these signs does not mean you have dementia. Signs of dementia usually start slowly, increase and worsen over time. Talk with your health care provider if you have questions or concerns about dementia.

Notes

Notes



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