



# Common health issues among seniors

Early detection is key to managing illnesses and ensuring good health. What are the tell-tale signs of common illnesses among older people?

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e often miss out on the signs of the onset of age-related health problems until it hits with full force. Caught unaware, we may find it hard to cope. Learn to recognise the symptoms and seek treatment early. Early detection can also help you manage and plan for the future. Here are some common age-related illnesses.

## What is glaucoma?

It is an eye disease where the fluid pressure inside the eyes rises, leading to failing vision or even blindness. There are two main types: primary open angle glaucoma and angle closure glaucoma. Open angle is painless and loss of vision is very gradual. Closed angle involves a drastic increase of pressure in the eye and the onset can be sudden and painful.

### Who are affected?

Those at high risk include people over the age of 60 and those with a family history of glaucoma. According to Dr Hoh Sek Tien, Associate Consultant, Glaucoma Service, Singapore National Eye Centre, about 10 percent of the population aged 70 and above in Singapore have glaucoma.

### What are the symptoms of glaucoma?

The affected individual will start to notice his peripheral vision gradually failing. Objects in front may still look clear, but objects to the side will be blurred. As the illness progresses, the field of vision narrows and blindness results. In a closed angle glaucoma attack, there will be a severe throbbing pain in the eye, redness, the appearance of haloes around lights, nausea and vomiting.

### How can glaucoma be treated?

**Medication.** This can be either in the form of eye drops or pills. Regular use will usually control the increased fluid pressure in the eyes.

**Surgery.** There are two types of surgery: conventional and laser. With conventional surgery, a new opening in the eye is made to release the excess fluid. In laser surgery, a strong beam of light is directed on the point where the fluid leaves the eye, enabling the fluid to drain better.

### How can you help?

Early detection and treatment can control the illness and prevent major vision loss. If your loved one falls under the high-risk category, he should have his eyes examined every two years by an eye care professional.

### What is Parkinson's disease?

It is a brain disorder that causes degeneration of nerve fibres in the part of the brain that controls balance and muscle movement coordination. People with Parkinson's disease may have difficulty walking, talking or doing simple tasks that depend on coordinated muscle movements. It usually affects those above 50 years old.

### What are the symptoms?

The four primary symptoms often appear gradually but increase in severity with time. They are:

- ❖ Tremors in hands, arms, legs, jaw and face.
- ❖ Rigidity or stiffness of the limbs.
- ❖ Slowness of motor movements.
- ❖ Loss of balance and coordination.

### How can Parkinson's disease be treated?

Medication can help reduce muscle rigidity, improve speed and movement coordination, as well as relieve tremors. In addition, physical therapy or muscle-strengthening exercises are also recommended.

### How can you help?

- ❖ Help him keep to a regular exercise routine.
- ❖ Be patient when he takes a long time to complete basic tasks.
- ❖ Pay attention to his diet and ensure that he is on an adequately nutritious diet as muscle rigidity can make swallowing difficult.

### What is dementia?

It is an illness that causes the brain cells to die faster than normal. It is not normal ageing. The mental abilities of a person with dementia declines, resulting in failing memory, deterioration of intellectual function and personality changes. Dementia affects mainly elderly people. In Singapore, about two percent of people over the age of 65 suffer from the condition.

There are two main types: Alzheimer's disease and multi-infarct dementia.

In Alzheimer's disease, the onset of symptoms and the progression of the illness are gradual. Present research suggests that there are certain chemicals that are lacking in the brain. As Alzheimer's disease is related to memory loss, one of the myths is that it is part of the ageing process. The other false belief is that Alzheimer's disease is related to mental illness. Multi-infarct dementia results from a series of strokes in the brain.

### What are the symptoms of dementia?

Generally, there are three stages that mark the onset and progression of the disease.

#### Early stage: mild dementia

The individual appears forgetful or occasionally repeats himself. Sometimes they behave oddly and become withdrawn, lethargic or agitated. Planning of day-to-day activities becomes difficult.

#### Middle stage: moderate dementia

- ❖ Changes become more noticeable
- ❖ Memory lapses are more obvious
- ❖ Behaviour becomes problematic and may interfere with normal day-to-day activities. Some of these behaviours include wandering and getting lost, repeating words, neglecting personal hygiene, losing track of time and events, forgetting the names of common objects and familiar people, irritability and agitation.

#### Last stage: severe dementia

The individual cannot recognise family members and will need help in personal care like bathing, going to the bathroom, dressing and eating. His speech may be difficult to understand and he may not understand what is being said to him.

### How can dementia be treated?

Most dementia are incurable, but for some in the early or middle stages of Alzheimer's, medication may alleviate

## COMMON PHYSIOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

### Hypertension

Hypertension is a silent illness that is 'asymptomatic', or has very few symptoms until much later. It is therefore important that one goes for regular routine check-ups. Hypertension can be detected by the rise in blood pressure. To prevent this, ensure a healthy diet with lots of fruits and vegetables. Cut down on red meat and salt and have a regular exercise routine.

### Multitude Medication

Taking a multitude of medication can increase the risk of the different medicines interacting and causing side effects. This is a common occurrence among older folks, as age reduces the body's efficiency in metabolising medication and eliminating them from the body. Yet, medication is important for treating and managing the many age-related illnesses that an older person may have. Consult a doctor to find the balance between risks and benefits of taking or not taking each medication.

### Irregular Heartbeat

An irregular heartbeat is one of the symptoms of Atrial Fibrillation (AF), a common heart rhythm abnormality among elderly people. AF can increase the risk of a stroke or heart attack and its diagnosis should be taken seriously. If an elderly family member suffers from this condition, try to reduce his stress and anxiety levels as it can help lessen his heart palpitations. Encourage him to take up yoga or taichi. Latest studies also show that eating broiled or baked fish also lowers the risk of irregular heartbeat among the elderly.

Sources: Changi General Hospital, Singapore National Eye Centre, Ministry of Health, TSAO Foundation, Alzheimer's Disease Association (Singapore).

some cognitive symptoms. More importantly, a supportive environment can benefit the patient.

### How can you help?

- ❖ Remind him constantly of the reality around him, for example, the day, date, month, year, time of day, place and the names of people around him.
- ❖ Help him keep to a regular routine.
- ❖ Give him memory aids like diaries, memo boards, signs, clocks and calendars to use.
- ❖ Hide car keys and install detectors on doors to help prevent accidents for those who wander.
- ❖ Seek the aid and support of organisations such as the Alzheimer's Disease Association (Singapore).

Website: <http://www.alzheimers.org.sg>

For a list of dementia day care centres, please refer to listings on page 54.

### What is incontinence?

It is the involuntary leakage of urine. There are two main types: stress incontinence and urge incontinence. Stress incontinence occurs when the individual coughs, sneezes, jumps or laughs heartily. With urge incontinence, the person is unable to control the urge to urinate, and urine involuntarily leaks out. Some people may suffer from both types of incontinence. About one in three older people are affected, with women twice as likely as men to suffer from this condition.

### What are the symptoms of incontinence?

People with urge incontinence tend to go to the bathroom many times a day, are unable to hold their bladder and have little 'accidents' before reaching the toilet.

### How can incontinence be treated?

Consult an urologist as treatment often simply involves counselling, training and pelvic floor therapy.

### How can you help?

Dr Pearlyn Quek, Consultant Urologist, Changi General Hospital suggests:

- ❖ Limiting caffeine intake and too much liquids before bedtime.
- ❖ Having urinals nearby. If the sufferer is not independent, it helps to bring them to the bathroom every four hours and after meals.

### What is arthritis?

It occurs when there is swelling, redness, stiffness and recurring pain in one or more joints. There are two common types that affect seniors: osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis.

Osteoarthritis is caused by wear and tear and old injuries suffered in the joints over time and usually affects the large weight-bearing joints like the knees, hips and spine. It commonly affects people over 60 years old. Rheumatoid arthritis is caused by an abnormal reaction of the immune system to the joints and usually affects those between 40 and 60 years old, especially women.



### What are the symptoms of arthritis?

Individuals with osteoarthritis may feel increased pain and stiffness progressively towards the end of the day. He may also experience chills or fever. Those with rheumatoid arthritis may have painful swellings, inflammation and stiffness in the arms, legs, wrists or fingers.

### How can arthritis be treated?

In mild cases of arthritis, anti-inflammatory drugs are often prescribed to reduce pain and inflammation. In

severe cases, injections are given to ease the pain and stiffness of affected joints.

### How can you help?

Be aware of any joint aches and pains and consult a doctor if you think there may be a case of arthritis. Encourage regular exercise and a proper diet as being overweight can put stress on weight-bearing joints. Exercise can also help maintain healthy muscles and preserve joint mobility. ♥

## DEPRESSION: MISCONCEPTIONS

**This is an often misunderstood condition that affects older people. We cast light on the illness and clarify common misconceptions.**

Many symptoms of depression are misunderstood and go undiagnosed. Often, they increase in the years after retirement, as change in daily routine and the onset of physical weakness and illness contribute to the condition.

Older people who suffer from depression are likely to blame it on events or social circumstances. But it is clear from brain-imaging studies that the culprits are often real biological changes. Brain circuits responsible for regulating mood, thinking, sleep, appetite and behaviour fail to work properly. The chemicals that brain cells use to communicate with each other, called neurotransmitters, go out of balance.

### Symptoms of depression

- ❖ Feelings of uselessness, helplessness and hopelessness
- ❖ Decreased or increased appetite
- ❖ Insomnia or hypersomnia (abnormal or excessive sleep)
- ❖ Agitation or fatigue
- ❖ Poor concentration
- ❖ Increased self-criticism and excessive guilt

### You can treat depression

Older people tend to hide their worries. Many assume that depression is part of the ageing process.

But it is important to recognise it is not and that depression is abnormal and treatable.

When someone exhibits bizarre or extreme mood-swings and behaviour, monitor the condition. Take note of whether five or more of these symptoms manifest themselves for more than two weeks. See if these symptoms interfere with normal work or family activities. If the answer to either question is 'yes', consult your doctor for an evaluation.

### What happens when you do not treat depression?

Left untreated, depression kick-starts a vicious cycle of illness and abnormality. Prolonged depression of six months or longer alters brain chemistry and develops into clinical depression. Suicide and attempted suicide are real threats and risks in depression.

Depression and anxiety also increase the risk of developing diabetes, multiple sclerosis, cancer and dementia. It can adversely affect one's recovery from other illnesses, too.

### What treatment is available?

**Anti-depressants** – These are effective in correcting the brain's chemical imbalance.

**Psychotherapy** – This helps uncover the reasons for depression and find ways for the patient to overcome them.

**Electro-convulsive therapy (ECT)** – This may be prescribed

when the patient's condition is life-threatening. Hospitalisation is necessary. The treatment involves electric currents being applied to the brain.

A combination of psychotherapy and anti-depressants is extremely effective in preventing depression from recurring. However, it is crucial that the family and community support the patient undergoing treatment, especially when the main reason for depression is social isolation. One study in the US shows that living in institutional care actually doubles the risk of depression, while being an active part of a social circle or community lowers the risk.

### Depression is not a character weakness

Often, an elderly person may keep his feelings to himself, which can mask a condition that requires medical attention. It is important that people realise depression is not a character weakness and that no stigma should be attached to it.

As we age, we suffer losses – of spouses, loved ones, our freedom. It is natural to grieve these losses. It is not natural to be unable to express our feelings of loss. Offer a compassionate ear to someone going through a painful time. Just by listening, we will be helping them through the normal stages of grief.

By staying mentally active, maintaining a positive outlook, and keeping in touch socially, we can also prevent the onset of depression.