Health Concerns for Elders in Your Life

Advances in medical science are helping to keep many once life-threatening illnesses under control, which means people are living longer, healthier lives. This also means that more and more elders are living with chronic, but manageable, conditions such as diabetes, which can leave them more susceptible to other illnesses.

All this is happening at a time when government cutbacks are stretching resources to the limit. The move from in-hospital treatment to outpatient care is throwing more responsibilities onto family members, but resources are limiting the time that healthcare providers can spend with caregivers to discuss their concerns.

Although in no way a replacement for professional medical advice, this guide is intended to give you, as a caregiver, a brief overview of both the common ailments and more serious illnesses associated with aging.

Physical Changes

Aging brings natural physical changes. These changes can be very gradual and include:

- Increasing fatigue
- Aching joints
- Dry skin
- Reduced vision
- Hearing loss
- Memory loss
- Sleep pattern changes

An elder may initially try to deny these changes, both to him or herself and to you. Denial only makes life harder and can prevent an elder from taking advantage of the help that is available.

Try to persuade your relative to discuss these changes with healthcare providers. Eyeglasses and hearing aids can make life much easier and there are medications, therapies, natural remedies and lifestyle changes that can help with other minor changes that accompany aging.

Common Ailments and Conditions

Although many physical problems are common among elders, this doesn't diminish the discomfort or distress they may cause. Encourage your relative to discuss concerns with healthcare providers, and ensure that your relative follows the treatment prescribed.

Constipation. Although elders may often worry when bowel movements become less frequent, this is normal with age. If constipation does become a concern, a high-fibre diet is generally preferable to laxative use as an in-home treatment. Consult a doctor if constipation continues or if there is bleeding.

Incontinence. Some loss of bladder control is normal as we age. Mild conditions can be controlled by medication or exercise. Minor surgery can be effective for some other cases. Some elders may have to accept some degree of incontinence. This can cause shame and depression, and lead to social withdrawal. Talk to your relative's healthcare provider about available specialized aids.

Skin conditions. Our skin becomes drier and thinner as we age, and is more vulnerable to infection. Use of a moisturizer may be recommended for itching. Sunscreen with a high SPF is suggested for all exposed areas.

Fungal infections are also common and may require a prescription from your relative's doctor. If you notice lesions on the skin or a change in the appearance of a mole, your relative should be checked by a doctor to rule out skin cancer.

Varicose veins. Bumpy, twisted veins, usually in the leg, can be painful. Treatment can include elastic

bandages, medication or occasionally, surgery.

Haemorrhoids. This is a variation of varicose veins, occurring in the rectum. Topical ointments can provide temporary relief but a doctor should be consulted if the condition lasts.

Memory loss. Elders are often concerned that occasional memory loss may signal a more serious cognitive condition. Remind your relative that some memory loss is normal and discuss techniques to jog the memory when required. If the memory loss becomes noticeably severe or mental confusion is apparent, arrange for your relative to see a healthcare provider. There are many causes for memory loss, and some can be reversible.

High blood pressure. This condition is usually first spotted during a regular medical check-up. If untreated, it can contribute to the risks of many serious conditions, so it's essential that doctor's orders are followed. Recommendations may include medication and lifestyle changes, including dietary restrictions.

Emergency Conditions

Call 911, or your local emergency number, if any of these symptoms occur:

- Severe gripping pain that radiates from the chest to the neck, jaw and arms
- Sudden weakness or paralysis in one or both sides of the body
- Sudden loss of vision
- Dizziness and unexplained stumbling
- High fever with rapid breathing and chest pain
- Unexplained bleeding
- Bloody diarrhea or urine
- Loss of consciousness

Common Serious Conditions

Aside from the common physical conditions that are experienced by many elders, there are also more serious conditions that can be expected with age.

Coronary disease. Angina is the milder form, noted by occasional severe, crushing pain in the chest and arms that may last a few minutes. Mild angina is treatable by medication and lifestyle changes. More severe forms, including sudden heart attacks, require emergency treatment and frequently surgery. The heart may be permanently weakened by the attack and adults who have suffered one attack are more susceptible to a second. Long-term medication and lifestyle changes are usually necessary.

Diabetes. This is a chronic condition that impedes the production and/or proper use of insulin, a hormone vital to the proper use of the energy contained in the food we eat. Diabetes can result in severe complications, such as limb amputation, blindness, kidney failure, heart disease, stroke and premature death. The risk of developing Type 2 diabetes, formerly called adult-onset or non-insulin-dependent diabetes, increases as we age. Treatment includes taking diabetes medicines, making wise food choices, exercising regularly, taking aspirin daily, and controlling blood pressure and cholesterol.

Stroke. A minor stroke may include momentary weakness on one side of the body, vision changes or blackouts. Quick recovery is usually possible but such attacks may signal the future onset of a major stroke and should receive medical attention. In a major stroke, there may be severe paralysis leading to immobility, speech or sight problems, and/or cognitive loss. Treatment includes hospitalization followed by rehab therapy. Long-term medication and lifestyle changes may be required.

Rheumatoid arthritis. This is one of the leading causes of disability as we age. Initial symptoms include stiff, painful and swollen joints of the fingers and feet, which later spread through the body. Rest and medication may be prescribed to relieve pain and help slow further deterioration. In severe cases, joint replacement surgery may be recommended.

Osteoarthritis. This less-severe arthritic condition is usually confined to a few joints, which may show some

deformity. The condition is often intermittent and can often be relieved by rest and medication.

In severe cases, joint replacement surgery may be necessary.

Osteoporosis. Gradual weakening of the bones can lead to brittle bones resulting in pain, fractures, curvature of the spine and height loss. Treatment may include weight loss if necessary, together with a calcium-enriched diet, exercise and medication.

Thrombophlebitis. This is a relatively common complication of varicose veins, causing pain that is often accompanied by swelling. The condition requires diagnosis by a physician and treatment with medication.

Pulmonary embolism. This migration of a blood clot to the arteries in the lungs can cause shortness of breath, coughing and severe pain. Acute conditions may also include spitting up blood and loss of consciousness. Medication may be sufficient for mild cases. Severe conditions require emergency hospitalization, oxygen treatment and frequently surgery.

Influenza and pneumonia. Both these conditions can be very serious in elders and require medical attention. Treatment may include rest and medication.
Chronic bronchitis. This is a chronic inflammation of the bronchial tubes causing coughing, breathing difficulties and fever. Medication and lifestyle changes are likely to be recommended.

Emphysema. Initial symptoms of this chronic lung disease include breathing difficulties after exertion, which later leads to permanent difficulties. Treatment is likely to include medication, lifestyle changes and, in severe cases, bottled oxygen.

There are associations and support groups connected with most illnesses that can provide valuable information and provide much needed support. Be sure to consult a healthcare professional to further discuss any of the conditions mentioned in this article. Also, take note of any extreme symptoms that require immediate medical attention.