

Older Adult Health

As we see ourselves getting older, we can become worried about our health. While some of the changes are normal, others may be signs of serious illness. How do we know when to be concerned and what we should do? By becoming aware of the common effects of aging and the signs and symptoms of possible medical conditions, we can help ourselves prepare for and cope with their effects.

Normal affects of aging:

General - physical:

- Fatigue
- Stiffness and aching in joints
- Dry skin, which can be more vulnerable to infection
- Memory loss
- Changes to sleep patterns, e.g. unable to sleep for long periods, but need short naps
- Constipation or less frequent bowel movements
- Incontinence

Sensory changes:

- **Eyesight** - a decline in perception; eyes are more sensitive to glare and take longer to adjust from dark to light and vice versa
- **Sense of touch**, smell and hearing may diminish
- **Balance** can be difficult due to a decline in equilibrium, less muscular strength and joint flexibility as well as changes in walking style

Although these changes may be normal, they can happen slowly over time, leading to subtle changes that go unnoticed by an older person. However, if you feel that these changes are affecting you be sure to discuss these with a healthcare provider.

Emotional and Physical Health conditions to watch for in Older Adults:

- **DEPRESSION:**

Although many older adults may feel down or blue at the loss of loved ones or friends, depression is not a natural symptom of aging. If an older adult shows one or a number of the following signs of depression, consult his or her healthcare provider. According to Health Canada, signs of depression can include:

- **Changes in behaviour:**
 - general sluggishness (or agitation)
 - loss of interest and pleasure in activities that used to provide some
 - withdrawal, decrease in social activities
- **Emotional changes**
 - acute sadness or feeling of emptiness
 - demoralization, despair
 - irritability
 - anxiety
- **Mental changes:**
 - concentration difficulties and memory loss
 - self-criticism, self-depreciation
 - suicidal thoughts
- **Physical changes:**
 - sleep disorders such as insomnia, and abnormal early waking
 - chronic fatigue, lack of energy
 - lack of interest in sexual activity
 - physical discomfort such as constipation, headaches and others

- **ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE:**

The Alzheimer Society suggests that the following can be signs of Alzheimer's disease:

- memory loss that affects day-to-day function
- difficulty performing familiar tasks
- problems with language
- disorientation of time and place
- poor or decreased judgment
- problems with abstract thinking
- misplacing things
- changes in mood or behaviour
- changes in personality
- loss of initiative

- **HEART DISEASE:**

- **Angina** - signalled by severe, crushing pain in chest and arms or "pressure" or "discomfort" that can radiate to the throat, jaw, back, or arms. The pain usually occurs after activity and/or emotional stress.
- **Stroke** - signs can include:
 - Sudden weakness, numbness or tingling in the face, arm or leg
 - Trouble speaking or comprehending
 - Vision problems
 - Severe or unusual headache
 - Dizziness
 - Uneven muscle tone on one side of the face, or one side of the body
- **High blood pressure** - or hypertension, is blood pressure greater than 140 mm Hg systolic pressure, or more than 90 mm Hg diastolic pressure. Often there are no symptoms, but high blood pressure increases the risk of coronary heart disease, heart attacks and stroke.

- **ARTHRITIS:**

- **Rheumatoid Arthritis** - initial symptoms include painful, swollen joints, which can spread to other body joints.
- **Osteoarthritis** - usually less severe and often confined to a few joints (e.g. stiff, swollen finger joints, etc.).

- **OSTEOPOROSIS:**

- Weakened and brittle bones that can result in pain, easily broken bones or curvature of the spine.

- **DIABETES:**

The most common is Type 2 diabetes, which occurs when the pancreas does not produce enough insulin or the body isn't effectively using the insulin it produces. The Canadian Diabetes Association lists these symptoms:

- unusual thirst
- frequent urination
- unusual weight loss
- extreme fatigue or lack of energy
- blurred vision
- frequent or recurring infections
- cuts and bruises that are slow to heal
- tingling or numbness in hands or feet

- **CANCER:**

- **Lung cancer** - a leading killer of older men, but also affects many women. Signs include a chronic cough, which may cause blood to appear in the sputum and increased mucus. Breathlessness, fever, and occasionally chest pains, may also be experienced.
- **Breast Cancer** - a leading cause of death among women. May be detected by regular self-examination for lumps (in/on breasts or under arms) as well as yearly mammograms.
- **Cervical cancer** - can be detected through a Pap test, which women should have as part of their annual medical exam.
- **Colorectal cancer** - signs are similar to other intestinal conditions such as bleeding from the rectum, persistent indigestion, a change in bowel habits (persistent constipation or diarrhoea) or dull abdominal pains.
- **Prostate Cancer** - often diagnosed later in life, and is treatable if caught early. The Prostate Cancer Alliance of Canada recommends that men between the ages of 50 and 75 talk to their physicians and possibly have the Prostate Specific Antigen blood test in addition to a digital rectal exam.
- **Skin cancer** - there are three types of skin cancer: basal cell, squamous cell, and the more rare melanoma. Basal and squamous cell cancers generally show up either as a pale, wax-like, pearly nodule or a crusty, red or scaly, patch. Melanoma can begin as a mole-like growth that can become itchy or bleed. It may be dark brown, or include areas of white, pink, blue or grey and may change colour or shape.

- **PNEUMONIA AND INFLUENZA** - may both become serious in older adults. Watch for signs of chest congestion.

- **EMPHYSEMA** - this can be signalled by difficulty breathing after any exertion.