

Geriatric (Elderly) Health

Overview

Geriatric health focuses on the health and well-being of older adults (typically aged 65+). According to the World Health Organization fact sheet on ageing and health, older people are more likely to experience multiple chronic conditions—such as hearing loss, osteoarthritis, COPD, diabetes, dementia—and often face complex combinations of these.

Maintaining functional independence, quality of life, and preventing disability are central to ageing well. The demographic shift towards increasing older populations globally makes geriatric health a key public health focus.

Causes / Risk Factors

Common risk factors for poor health in older age include:

- The accumulation of cellular damage, chronic exposure to risk factors (smoking, poor diet, lack of exercise)
- Multiple co-existing conditions (multimorbidity) and polypharmacy (use of multiple medications) leading to interactions and adverse effects
- Social determinants: isolation, poverty, inadequate access to healthcare, cognitive decline, and reduced mobility
- Age-related physiological changes: reduced immune function, slower metabolism, decreased muscle mass (sarcopenia), sensory deficits

Symptoms / Warning Signs

In older adults, warning signs include:

- Unexpected weight loss, loss of appetite or mobility decline (may signal underlying disease)
- Memory loss, confusion, or changes in mental state (possible early dementia)
- Repeated falls or fractures (indicate frailty or osteoporosis)
- Persistent fatigue, breathlessness, or swelling (may signal cardiovascular, pulmonary or renal disease)

Prevention / Lifestyle

Preventive lifestyle measures for older adults include:

- Engaging in regular physical activity including strength/balance training to reduce fall risk and maintain muscle mass
- Balanced nutrition with sufficient protein, calcium, vitamin D; avoiding malnutrition or excessive caloric intake
- Routine screenings and vaccinations (e.g., influenza, pneumococcus, shingles) as immune function declines with age
- Social engagement, mental stimulation, adequate sleep, and safe living environments to maintain cognitive and emotional well-being

Screening / Diagnosis

Screening and assessment in geriatric health may include:

- Functional assessments (mobility, activities of daily living), cognitive screening (e.g., Mini-Cog), hearing/vision tests
- Screening for chronic conditions: hypertension, diabetes, osteoporosis (bone density), cancers
- Review of medications for potential polypharmacy risks; assessment of fall risk and home safety
- Loneliness, depression and social isolation screening to address psychosocial determinants

Management / Public Health Perspective

From a public health standpoint:

- Geriatrics emphasises person-centred care, coordination across disciplines (geriatricians, physiotherapists, social work)
- Ageing and health strategies (WHO) focus on "adding life to years" rather than merely "years to life"
- Policies around healthy ageing, long-term care infrastructure, caregiver support, age-friendly environments are increasingly important as populations age
- Research is addressing geriatric syndromes (frailty, dementia), and technological innovations (tele-health, assistive devices) help support independence and reduce healthcare burden

Summary Points

- Older adulthood comes with increased risk of multiple chronic conditions, but healthy ageing and independence remain achievable
- Prevention (exercise, nutrition, social connection) remains critical at older ages
- Public health must shift to support ageing populations through age-friendly systems and integrated care

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