

Aging Considerations: Chronic Illness

Chronic illnesses occur more frequently in later years. More than 80 percent of Americans over age 65 experience one or more chronic health problems. Other disabilities are also common. Most common is the ability to adapt to challenges and limitations in order to lead productive and contented lives. There is a strong correlation between physical health and mental health. Though depression or anxiety may affect anyone, people suffering from a chronic illness are often at greater risk.

A skilled health professional should educate older people regarding the relationship between their physical health issues and their risk for mental health problems. Older adults should know if any of the medications they take could have a mental health side effect – there are many medications that can actually cause depressive symptoms.

A mental health disorder can worsen the symptoms and limitations of a chronic illness and vice versa. It is important to treat all illnesses at the same time, as medications and other treatment therapies permit. Healing is most successful when all health issues are addressed at the same time.

The following are some examples of common later life ailments and their association with mental illness:

Diabetes: Diabetes may double the risk of depression. The chances of becoming depressed increase as diabetes worsens. The stress and metabolic effects of diabetes on the brain are primary causes of associated depression.

Stroke: Between 10-27 percent of those who suffer a stroke experience major depression. An additional 15-40 percent experience some symptoms of depression within two months following a stroke. Causes may include: location of the brain lesion, previous or family history of depression and pre-stroke social functioning. Common characteristics of stroke survivors suffering from depression include less compliance with rehabilitation, irritability, and/or personality change.

Cancer: An estimated 25 percent of those with cancer also suffer from depression. A co-occurring depression can seriously impact a cancer patient's ability to participate in treatment and ultimately impact of the course of the disease.

Heart Disease 1 in 3 people who have survived a heart attack experience major depression. Depression may result in chronically elevated levels of stress hormones, such as cortisol and adrenaline. This causes the body's metabolism to not make the type of tissue repairs needed in heart disease.