

THE OMINOUS OCTET OF OLDER WOMEN'S HEALTH



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HEALTH INEQUALITIES: OLDER WOMEN VERSUS OLDER MEN

Globally, older women outnumber older men and, on average, women live a few years longer than men. However, compared to older men, older women live with greater disability and higher prevalence of health problems, including depressive disorders and chronic locomotor or cognitive impairments. Older women also are more likely to experience socioeconomic marginalisation than older men, and they are more vulnerable to discrimination, indifference, delay and neglect in receiving health care and attention from community.

This article highlights eight conditions that are common and more prevalent in older women than in older men. Due to lack of mass awareness of older women's health issues, many age-related symptoms are simply passed off as consequences of normal ageing and thereby remain undetected and concealed. As gerontologists, we need to increase awareness, screening, early detection, and treatment related to these issues.

8 Conditions

1. Chronic Pains and Aches
2. Forgetfulness
3. Joint Complaints
4. Falls and Fractures
5. Frailty
6. Insomnia
7. Depression
8. Urinary Incontinence

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01 Chronic Pains and Aches

Compared to older men, chronic pains are more prevalent among older women. Ageing-related changes result in less dense and less flexible muscles, which are more prone to aches and pains. Women may experience neck pain with or without stiffness, low back pain, or pelvic pain. Any specific disease responsible for these pains may not be forthcoming, but presence of a contributory disorders such as hypothyroidism, anemia, fibromyalgia, or an autoimmune disease must be investigated. Use of lipid-lowering drugs like statins can also produce muscle pains, while other causes may include chronic fatigue syndrome, insomnia, anxiety and stress. Preventive strategies include exercise, proper diet, quality sleep, hydration, and maintenance of body weight etc.

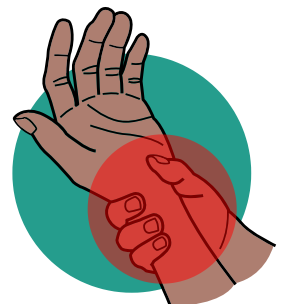
02 Forgetfulness



Older women fare slightly better than older men on testing for episodic memory. However, when it comes to more serious issues of cognitive impairment, dementia, and Alzheimer disease, it is the older women who are the more frequent sufferers. Older women with dementia outnumber older men 2 to 1. Brain cells die faster in females. Possible causes of more frequent dementia in older women have been propounded due to their longer life span and loss of neuro protection from estrogen deficiency. Medical consultation should be obtained as soon as there are indications of mild cognitive impairment. These include frequently misplacing objects, repeating the same words again and again, having trouble making conversation, having difficulty in decision making, or losing track of the date or time of the year.

03 Joint Complaints

Arthritis is a musculoskeletal disease that causes pain, stiffness and swelling of various joints, e.g., hands, fingers, knee, other larger joints, neck and vertebral joints in the spine. Osteoarthritis, rheumatoid arthritis, and arthralgias (joint pain without swelling) all are much more common in older women than in older men. Coexisting osteoporosis, visual impairment, and other factors make the older women more liable to suffer fall-related injuries, including fractures. Possible causes of arthritis include obesity, past injury to a joint, and menopause. Exercise, maintenance of body weight, and managing coexisting morbidities are important.



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04 Falls and fractures

Falls are the leading cause of injury, death, and hospitalization among older people. Falls and fractures, especially hip fractures, are more prevalent in older women. Impaired vision, poor balance, reduced muscle mass and joint flexibility, impaired hearing, unsafe home environment, multiple medications, and chronic diseases like Alzheimer's and arthritis are the predisposing factors to falls, while osteoporosis adds to the risk of fractures. Addressing these risk factors and using assistive mobility devices can help prevent falls and fractures.

05 Frailty

Frailty is characterised by weight loss (shrinking), weakness (low muscle strength), fatigue (exhaustion), slow walking speed, and low physical activity. Normally, frailty predicts early mortality due to adverse health outcomes and repeated falls that often lead to recurrent hospitalizations and nursing home admissions. However, despite the fact that frailty is more common in older women than older men, frailty does not predict mortality in older women to the same extent. In fact, women appear to be more resilient and therefore have a longer life expectancy even when frail. Still, frailty needs to be detected using approved tools and addressed for every patient.

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06 Insomnia



Insomnia or sleeplessness is a highly under-rated symptom, and yet up to 75% of older adults experience insomnia. Insomnia is also more common among older women compared to older men. This may express as difficulty falling asleep, mid-night awakening and difficulty in going back to sleep, or early morning awakening. Physiological changes of ageing, environmental conditions, and chronic medical or psychiatric illnesses contribute to insomnia. Chronic insomnia results in impaired concentration, cognitive deficits, poor quality of life, and increased susceptibility to falls. Serious hazards of chronic insomnia may include stroke, heart attacks, and dementia. Insomnia screening facilitates early intervention, which could include non-pharmacological (e. g. cognitive behaviour therapy) and pharmacological approaches.

07 Depression

Women of all ages are more likely to report depressive symptoms than males. Possible risk factors include negative life events, widowhood, loneliness, poor health, dementia, financial marginalization, and rumination. Tool-based screening helps in unmasking depression among community dwelling older adults and makes early intervention possible.



08 Urinary Incontinence



Urinary incontinence also is an under-rated symptom. Because of social stigma, many women with urinary incontinence suffer in silence. The problem is, however, often amenable to successful treatment. Urinary tract infections (UTI) also are more common in women than men. Risk factors include diabetes due to damage to nerves, weak pelvic floor muscles, overactive bladder muscles, arthritis (difficulty in reaching bathroom in time), Alzheimer's disease, and prolapse of the uterus or anus. Treatment with medications and pelvic muscle exercises are some of the management steps.