The Healthy Aging Checklist

Cheatsheet: 7 Commonly Neglected Problems to Address for Healthier Aging

By Leslie Kernisan, MD MPH

About the Healthy Aging Checklist

Maintaining the best possible health while aging is key to maintaining what is most important to us: our ability to be as physically and mentally capable as possible, so that we can remain active, engaged in our lives, and as independent as possible.

In fact, most “aging” problems that seniors and families struggle with — like difficulties with mobility, memory, or independence — track back to underlying health problems.

To promote healthy aging — and to optimize health even if a person has chronic illnesses or an “incurable” condition like Alzheimer’s disease -- it’s important to do six key things. This Healthy Aging Checklist is a framework that can be used by all older adults.

The Healthy Aging Checklist

✓ Promote Brain Health & Emotional Health
✓ Promote Physical Health
✓ Check For & Address Common Senior Health Problems (includes falls, memory concerns, depression, incontinence, pain, isolation, & polypharmacy)
✓ Learn to Optimize Management of Chronic Health Conditions
✓ Get Recommended Preventive Health Services for Older Adults
✓ Address Medical, Legal, and Financial Advance Care Planning

Cheatsheet: 7 Common Senior Health Problems to Address for Healthier Aging

The following cheatsheet lists seven often neglected problems that often sabotage health and quality of life in older adults. Although families and some doctors may think of these as “part of getting old,” the truth is that correctly evaluating and managing these problems helps seniors live better, healthier lives.

For more details on why these matter for healthy aging, and the best ways to handle them, see my full post:

7 Commonly Neglected Problems to Address for Healthier Aging; The Healthy Aging Checklist Part 3
# Healthy Aging Checklist, Part 3

## Cheatsheet for Addressing 7 Commonly Neglected Senior Health Problems

These problems often drag down health and quality of life, and are easily missed by doctors. They are also often sub-optimally managed by doctors. Be sure to get help addressing them, for healthier aging.

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<th>Commonly Neglected Problem</th>
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| **Falls.** Falls and feeling unsteady are common in older adults, and can cause seniors to restrict their activity. Some falls cause life-changing injuries, or may force a person to move to new housing. Most falls are due to multiple factors, including decreased strength and balance. The right exercises can help, but it’s also good to check for and address other factors, such as medications that may be increasing fall risk. | [CDC STEADI Materials for Older Adults](#) (see [here](#) for PDF to check your risk factors)  
[Why Older People Fall](#)  
[How to Prevent Falls: 5 Proven Approaches to Ask the Doctor About](#)  
[8 Things to Have the Doctor Check After an Aging Person Falls](#)  
[NHSSeniorHealth Balance Exercises for Fall Prevention](#) (includes videos) |
| **Memory concerns.** These often cause anxiety and may reflect real decreases in thinking abilities. But it’s common for evaluations to uncover treatable causes of decreased brain function, such as medication side-effects, thyroid disease, electrolyte imbalances, and a variety of other problems. Don’t delay in addressing memory concerns; you want to prevent unsafe situations related to driving, finances, and personal safety. The underlying problem may not be Alzheimer’s or another dementia, but if it is, you are better off finding out early, since the right planning and management can slow down decline and maximize independence. Be sure to encourage the activities that promote brain health, as these help people with memory concerns think their best. | [What’s Causing Your Memory Loss? It's not necessarily Alzheimer's](#)  
[Is It Really Dementia?](#)  
[How We Diagnose Dementia: The Practical Basics to Know](#) (this post explains exactly how I evaluate memory concerns, and tells you how to prepare to see a doctor for this purpose.)  
[How to Promote Brain Health: The Healthy Aging Checklist Part 1](#) |
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| **Depression.** This treatable problem is especially easy to miss in older adults. It may manifest as “loss of interest in previously enjoyable activities” rather than as frequent sadness. Depression is more common in those who are struggling with chronic illness, involved in family caregiving, or socially isolated. Treating depression improves quality of life, can reduce chronic pain, and enables seniors to take better care of their health. Be sure to ask about treatment with therapy and non-drug approaches; these can be as effective as medication for mild-moderate depression. If prescription antidepressants are used, many geriatricians choose sertraline or escitalopram when possible, as research suggests these tend to have fewer side-effects and interactions. | Depression in Older Adults and the Elderly  
Pharmacological Treatment of Depression in the Elderly |
| **Urinary incontinence.** Chronic difficulties with urine leaks or bladder control are often accepted as part of aging. But if it’s embarrassing or bothersome, it can cause seniors to restrict their social or physical activities, and that’s bad for health and quality of life. Incontinence can usually be improved once the type and underlying causes are identified. Log symptoms in a voiding diary to help doctors correctly evaluate the problem. Finding suitable pads to manage leaks can also help a lot. Certain types of exercises and bladder training therapy may help. Note that medication for bladder spasms are usually very anticholinergic (so risky for brain function) and should be used with caution, if at all. | What to Know About Bladder Control for Women  
Urinary Incontinence in Men |
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<td><strong>Pain.</strong> Surveys show that about 50% of seniors experience bothersome pain every month. Persisting pain has been linked to decreased social and physical activity, depression, and not taking good care of oneself. Pain can almost always be reduced, and should be managed by non-drug approaches whenever possible. Proven ways to treat pain include psychotherapy (which changes the way people perceive and cope with pain), exercise, physical therapy, and judicious use of medications. Bear in mind that many OTC painkillers – such as Advil and Motrin – are non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs). These are risky for older adults when used chronically or in high doses, as they worsen kidney function and cause internal bleeding in the stomach or bowel.</td>
<td><strong>Dealing with Persistent Pain in Older Adults</strong>  <strong>Pain Management in Older Adults: Tools &amp; Tips</strong>  <strong>Experts Warn Against Long-Term Use of Common Pain Pills</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Isolation and loneliness.</strong> Isolation means lack of social contact with others, and loneliness means feeling a lack of social connection. Both are very common in seniors – 43% of seniors reported loneliness in a recent study – and have been linked to depression, decreased immune function, and even a higher risk of dying. Seniors are at especially high risk if they live alone, are bereaved, or have health problems that are interfering with social and physical activities. Some seniors in proximity to others – such as spousal caregivers or people residing in a facility – also often report loneliness. Arranging more social contact usually helps. Research has also found that certain types of psychotherapy – including mindfulness – can reduce loneliness and even inflammation in the body.</td>
<td><strong>Isolation V. Loneliness: The Difference And Why It Matters</strong>  <strong>What Works for Health: Activity Programs for Older Adults</strong>  <strong>14 Ways to Help Seniors Avoid Social Isolation</strong>  <strong>Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Training Reduces Loneliness and Pro-Inflammatory Gene Expression in Older Adults</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Polypharmacy (Taking multiple medications).</strong> Taking multiple medications (especially 5+) is a hassle, often expensive, and puts seniors at particular risk for side-effects and medication interactions. Every year over 170,000 older adults visit the emergency room due to medications. But research shows that many seniors are taking medications they don’t really need, because it’s easier for doctors to prescribe than “deprescribe.” By requesting a careful medication review, older adults can improve quality of life and reduce risk of harm.</td>
<td><strong>How to Review Medications for Safety &amp; Appropriateness</strong>  <strong>How to Think Like a Geriatrician about Senior Medications</strong>  <strong>MedStopper.com</strong> (Pharmacist-created online resource designed to help with deprescribing)</td>
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About Dr. Leslie Kernisan and Better Health While Aging:

Leslie Kernisan, MD MPH, is a practicing geriatrician who believes it should be easier for older adults to have the best possible health and quality of life as they age.

Through her website Better Health While Aging, she provides practical information on how to address many common health problems that affect older adults. She also addresses common concerns and dilemmas related to helping older parents and other aging relatives.

Visit BetterHealthWhileAging.net to find more useful articles on senior health, family caregiving, and helping older parents.

You can also join us by listening to the podcast.