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Tip Sheet: Older Adults Living with Chronic Health Conditions and Daily Living Needs

What's the Problem?

With the increase in longevity and our society's expansive aging population, more people are living with chronic health conditions. While longer life is seemingly positive, it does come with its detriments. The most prevalent chronic illnesses that affect older adults are heart disease, stroke, cancer, type 2 diabetes, obesity, and arthritis.

Chronic illness can affect one in their day-to-day life and can make it difficult to perform activities of daily living. ADLs are activities that people do every day like eating, bathing, dressing, toileting, walking, and going to the bathroom. IADLs, or instrumental activities of daily living, allow one to live independently in their communities. These include doing laundry, preparing a meal, managing money, and grocery shopping. Older adults living with a chronic health condition may have an increasingly harder time carrying out their ADLs and IADLs independently.

Who Is at Risk?

Anyone, regardless of their age, is at risk of living with a chronic health condition and having daily challenges. However, adults age 65 and older make up the largest majority of those living with day-to-day health issues that affect their ability to live independently.

Older adults are at the highest risk of COVID-19 and certain preexisting medical conditions can also increase the risk for severe illness. Communities of color, including older adults, have been disproportionately impacted as the pandemic has further exposed how structural racism contributes to racial and ethnic health inequalities. The CDC along with state health departments recommended that adults 65 and over receive a COVID-19 vaccine.

Can It Be Prevented?

Some chronic illnesses can be prevented, especially those that are caused by partaking in health risk behaviors. A lack of exercise or physical activity, poor nutrition, high alcohol intake, and excessive tobacco use are all associated with having chronic health conditions. Taking care of our bodies with good nutrition, exercise, and avoiding harmful substances can help reduce the risk for major health problems throughout one's life. Some chronic health conditions, like cancer and Parkinson's disease for example, may be linked to family history and are harder to prevent.

For the many older adults living with chronic health conditions that affect their daily functioning, it is important that they know about ways to plan and play a dynamic role in their daily care. While some living with a chronic condition are able to enjoy a good quality of life and perform their daily functioning, chronic diseases may be ultimately accompanied by slow, extended periods of decline and disability. Therefore, it is vital to plan ahead to make sure tools are put in place that can help with daily living. This might include securing a caregiver or caregiving team, or other activities like help with paying bills, taking medications regularly, and scheduling and getting to appointments and social activities. This is vital as there may be a time when a person is unable to fully communicate health-related decisions.

Bottom Line

While we cannot control our future, we can play a major part in having a healthy aging process. By maintaining a healthy diet and staying physically active, we can reduce the risk of getting some of the chronic health conditions that affect daily living as we get older. If one is diagnosed with a chronic health condition, one can still have a high quality of life and live a life of dignity, choice, and independence.

Case Example

Ken, a 70-year-old guitarist, devoted the majority of his life to writing and performing music. He lived on the road – his dream job – traveling around the world and doing what he loves. This included smoking and drinking alcohol after his late-night shows. Now, in his older age, these health behaviors from his youth have left him with lung cancer and arthritis in the joints of his fingers. He has a hard time performing being independent with dressing and eating because of his chronic health conditions. Luckily, the cancer was caught in Stage I and he is able to get treatment. The arthritis has made it difficult for him to play the guitar, but he has developed a newfound love for drumming. He takes a daily medication, as well as regularly seeing a massage therapist and acupuncturist. He has navigated his chronic conditions in a healthy way and still carries a positive outlook on his life and what he can achieve looking ahead.

Resources

- The SCAN Foundation, Aging Well: <http://www.thescanfoundation.org/aging-well>
- California Department of Aging: <https://www.aging.ca.gov/>
- CDC, Advance Care Planning: <http://www.cdc.gov/aging/advancecareplanning/index.htm>
- CDC, Chronic Disease: <https://www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease/>
- National Institutes of Health, Arthritis: http://www.niams.nih.gov/Health_info/Arthritis/default.asp#h
- CDC, Aging: <https://www.cdc.gov/aging/>
- The Conversation Project: <https://theconversationproject.org/nhdd/#welcome>
- CDC, Older Adults & COVID-19: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/need-extra-precautions/older-adults.html>