

What is Geriatrics and what should we know about it?

Dr. Dipankar Debnath

MBBS. PG Dip. Geriatric Medicine. Trained in DNB Family Medicine
Senior Consultant in Geriatric Medicine, Family Medicine & Diabetes Care
Home Elder Care Advisor
CEO, Medical Director of 60 Plus Care & Clinic, Kolkata
9830303450

Ageing is an inevitable, progressive and generalized impairment of functions, resulting in loss of adaptive response to stress and increases the risk of age related diseases. But the most positive aspect of ageing is that it is involved with psychological growth in capacities for strategy, decision making, prudence, wisdom, reasoning and experience.

Mechanism of ageing

- Genetically determined life span
- Mutation of genes
- Wear and tear of organs of our body
- Free radical damage to intracellular structures
- Impaired DNA repair

There are many ways to live a healthy elderly life. This independent, disease free healthy life is described as successful ageing that denotes -

- Low probability of disease
- Normal cognitive and physical functioning
- Active engagement with life
- Live independently and productive as far as possible
- Always have a positive attitude
- Always remember “**Use It or Loose It**”

The world along with our country India is aging and with the blessings of science and improved socioeconomic conditions our life span is increasing. Today average life expectancy is 65 years, which was around 42 years in 1947. Along with increased life expectancy the problems of elderly are increasing. These problems are arising primarily from the society. Most of the elderly people of our community have to live alone at home due to migration of their children for education or jobs.

The modern world has also given birth to nuclear families which is a curse for the elderly people. Previously elderly were the most respectful members of the family and were involved with grandparenting, but now they were relieved from such burden. In these modern families they are looked upon as a burden in this era of economic crisis. This transition leads to their misery. So the time has come to think for them and give them a little support. We need to keep them active and productive in our modern society and not think of them as useless group of people but give them their rights and dignity.

Geriatrics / Geriatric Medicine is a branch of medicine that deals with aging process, disease prevention, diagnosis and treatment of health problems of elderly. It aims to promote health, prevent and treat disease and disabilities of later life while taking care of social and economic conditions that affect the health of the elderly. It is a *multidisciplinary affair* with the principles of preventive medicine at its core. At present in health care sectors, majority of the patients are from these age groups.

Geriatrics is different from General Medicine as the approach, diagnostic goals, treatment modalities and ethical dilemmas are more challenging and lead to a new type of medical management that does not follow the conservative dual physician-patient relationship, but is based on a triad of physician-caregiver-patient relationship. Preventive care strategy is the cornerstone of geriatrics and is one of the best ways to promote better quality of life in old age.

Elderly are different younger adults - As we grow old many changes occur to the body's systems, and we develop new physical and psychological characteristics that need a specialized approach. Each elderly person is different from the other and individualized approach of care is needed.

- Reduced homeostatic reserve - Ageing is associated with a decline in various organ functions with a reduced ability to compensate.
- Multiple pathology - they commonly present with more than one problem, usually with a number of causes.
- Atypical presentations - Sick old people often present differently from younger people. They present with 'general deterioration of health' or functional decline masking the actual disease. Drowsiness is common, and does not necessarily indicate a primary brain problem. Pattern of diseases are different – like pneumonia causes confusion
- Impaired immunity - Older people do not necessarily have a raised white cell count or a fever with infection. Hypothermia may occur instead.
- Early manifestations of symptoms and signs of disease - Simple and timely interventions helps in better treatment and outcome and also improve quality of life.
- Rapid worsening of condition if treatment is delayed.
- Importance of Rehabilitation - Older people may take longer to recover from illness. Their ability to perform activities of daily living and gain independence can improve dramatically if they are given time and rehabilitation.
- Early discharge from hospital – Discharge planning is done from day one with regular evaluation. This reduces hospital acquired infections and improves quality of life.

GIANTS of Geriatric medicine are the most common symptoms and signs which the elderly presents in any type of illness -

- Impairment of memory / dementia
- Immobility and falls,
- Incontinence.
- Impairment of vision & hearing

There is a growing need of geriatrics in our country. According to the Indian Council of Medical Research, the special problems of the elderly are best dealt within a geriatric unit with trained Geriatricians, nurses and caregivers along with special emphasis on:

- early discharge
- early rehabilitation
- remedial exercise
- physiotherapy
- occupational therapy
- psychiatric therapy

The most common health risks for this group of people are -

- Malnutrition
- Chronic diseases
- Inadequate fibers in diet
- Sedentary life style
- Addiction – smoking, excessive alcohol intake,
- Delayed treatment
- Irregular treatment
- Accidents and injuries
- Home environment hazards

There are some basic principles that we need to keep in mind while caring for elderly patients.

- Care versus cure
- Improvement and or maintenance of function and quality of life
- Prevention of diseases and ill health
- To remain healthy & productive
- To reduce dependence of all types
- Comfort and care for terminally ill

What is our role as Geriatricians?

- A majority of problems of elderly occur in the community and primary care approach is needed.
- Health care professionals job is to help them stay healthy and lead independent life
- We need to maximize the existing capabilities of these people
- Provide regular health care and supervision along with integration of other specialties
- Early detection and treatment of illness
- Monitor effectiveness and side effects of medications and treatment

- Assessment of nutritional status
- Lifestyle modifications, social support, health education
- Enhance volunteering facilities & services

Most common diseases which these people suffer from are -

- Hypertension
- Cataract
- Senile Dementia
- Osteoarthritis
- Ischaemic Heart disease
- Constipation
- Depression / Psychogenic disorders
- Diabetes
- Benign Prostatic Hypertrophy
- Incontinence
- COPD and Asthma
- Malignancy

Pre-Geriatrics

This is a stage that starts approximately from 50 to 55 years. It is a very important stage of life as we are in a transitional phase from our adult to elderly life. At this time we have to think for our elderly life and do the future planning. This is the last chance for our error rectification – like giving up of addictions, exercise regularly, have healthy diet.

Important aspects that we should keep in mind are

- Medical
- Psychological
- Social
- Financial
- Legal

During this period Pre-Retirement Counseling should be done so that the people get a clear picture for his future life and plan accordingly. All modes of prevention should be adopted from this stage. Financial planning needs to be done from this time. Main target should be to have an independent retired life with a healthy life.

Geriatric Care can be delivered through -

- Out Patient clinic
- Day Care Centre
- Old Age Homes
- Medical Institutions
- Social & Community care
- Rehabilitation services
- Home Care Services
- Awareness camps

Approach to elderly patients in geriatric unit is a bit different from general medicine. Important aspects are -

- One chief complain approach not applicable
- Differentiate treatable from untreatable problems
- Serial determination of functional problem
- Identify the causative problem
- Symptom targeted approach
- Risk benefit analysis
- Multidisciplinary team involvement
- Home visit – a must by a geriatric team member
- Socioeconomic problems must be dealt with

There is a common term called geriatric assessment in geriatrics. It is the clinical approach to older patients that goes beyond General medicine or any other specialty. Its goal is to recognize common geriatric problems or other ailments that affects health of elderly. It consists of-

- Baseline evaluation

- Usual clinical evaluation
- Functional ability
- Psychiatric status
- Screening for non-communicable diseases
- Past medical history and chronic diseases
- Family history
- Social history
- Economic history
- Caregivers role
- Home Environment assessment

There are some ways you stay active in elderly years. These are:

- Active involvement with life
- Cultivation and promotion of hobbies
- Volunteering
- Active participation in social and communal programs
- Bridge the generation gap
- Brisk walking for 45 mins at least 5 days a week if possible or have no medical restrictions
- Regular exercises or yoga

Therefore, to conclude older patients should not interpret their pain or dysfunction as "normal" signs of aging. In geriatrics and for older people multiple problems are the rule for a clinical presentation or a cause for hospitalisation. As a geriatrician we advice older people to live and age gracefully, aim for healthy and productive ageing, live as independently as possible, have a positive outlook and attitude for old age and adapt to the present situations and have a better bond with newer generations and help to bridge the generation gap.