

Area Agency on Aging *Connections*

Geriatric assessments useful in maintaining quality of life

By Daniel Casciato
For Pittsburgh Senior News

According to the American Geriatrics Society (AGS), a comprehensive geriatric assessment is a necessary tool to minimize disability and loss of independence in frail older-adult patients.

A geriatric assessment is a comprehensive evaluation designed to optimize a senior's ability to enjoy good health, improve overall quality of life, reduce the need for hospitalization or institutionalization, and enable them to live independently for as long as possible.

Since it is difficult for a single primary care physician to adequately evaluate and plan for the care of a senior with many problems, teamwork is required.

"The team approach to complete care for a geriatric person usually involves a primary care physician, a social worker or psychologist, perhaps an RN case manager, and members of other professions such as a dietician, as needed," says Jean Kablack, intake supervisor for the Allegheny County Department of Human Services Area Agency on Aging (ACAAA).

Dr. Adele Towers, medical director of Benedum Geriatric Center at UPMC, explains that a geriatric assessment is very similar to a standard physical exam except the physician incorporates other features of a person's life.

"In addition to their physical health, we look at their emotional health and their functional health, how well they function in their home and in doing their

daily activities," she says. "We determine whether or not there needs to be an assessment of other issues like their medications and other things that can affect them in their day-to-day living. It's very similar to a standard physical exam except it has these additional elements."

She adds that people tend to know when they need an assessment because things aren't going well at home.

"They want things to be better and people want to maintain themselves in their homes," she says. "If they feel they're failing in the home, that's a reason to come."

The assessment can be done in a short period of time or over an extended period. While it is most commonly used for seniors with cognitive issues such as dementia, Dr. Towers says that it's necessary to look across the full spectrum of physical, mental and psychosocial health issues.

"If you're 85 and have difficulty functioning at home because heart failure is becoming a problem, you're not able to get your medications on a regular basis, you have stress because you have to care for your spouse, maybe you're experiencing dementia — these are areas where a multidisciplinary approach can be helpful," she says. "However, if you just have straightforward high blood pressure and heart disease, a geriatric assessment may not be necessary for you."

To find out where you can go for a geriatric assessment, call SeniorLine at (412) 350-5460. *PSN*

An assessment usually consists of the following steps:

1. A complete examination of the senior's current status in terms of:
 - physical, mental and psychosocial health;
 - ability to function well and independently perform basic daily living activities like eating, dressing and bathing;
 - living arrangements, social network and access to support services.
2. Identification of any current problems or possible future problems in any of the above-mentioned areas.
3. Development of a comprehensive care plan that addresses any problems and suggested actions, and makes specific recommendations regarding resources needed to provide necessary support services. According to the UPMC Institute on Aging, the care plan can include a monitoring checklist of:
 - Diagnosis
 - Medications
 - Nutrition, vision, dental and hearing screening
 - Continence and defecation
 - Immunizations
 - Cognition and emotion
 - Sleep disorders
 - Mobility and exercise
 - Cooperation with care plans
 - Advance directives
4. Ongoing monitoring of the problems identified and any adjustments to the care plan.

Seniors can call ACAA to find out which places in the county offer geriatric assessments, but recommends that they also speak with their insurance company.

"Before they do anything, the most important thing a senior can do is contact their insurance provider to find out where they would be covered for the range of testing that may be involved in an assessment," Jean says. "All insurers are different, so it's best to check with them first. We would also recommend to people who are interested in receiving a geriatric assessment to speak with their medical provider because they may need a referral."

Dr. Towers recommends that if an assessment is scheduled, seniors should bring along a companion.

"Always bring somebody with you," she says. "You should also bring all of your medications and any medical records that you have. And then come and be prepared to spend a couple of hours."