CHAPTER 1
DISEASES AND DISORDERS OF THE GASTROINTESTINAL TRACT
(7 CONTACT HOURS)

Learning objectives
- Review the anatomy of the gastrointestinal system.
- Describe diseases of the oral cavity.
- Identify treatment of diseases of the oral cavity.
- Explain the types of disorders and diseases affecting the esophagus.
- Evaluate treatment initiatives for disorders and diseases affecting the esophagus.
- Identify pathophysiology of gastric diseases and disorders.
- Evaluate treatment initiatives for gastric diseases and disorders.
- Explain the pathophysiology of peptic ulcer disease.
- Describe treatment measures for peptic ulcer disease.
- Differentiate between ulcerative colitis and Crohn’s disease.
- Describe the pathophysiology of inflammatory bowel disease.
- Explain treatment initiatives for inflammatory bowel disease.
- Discuss the signs and symptoms of colorectal cancer.
- Discuss the signs and symptoms of anal cancer.
- Describe the effects of Celiac disease.
- Explain the pathophysiology of diverticular disease.
- Differentiate among treatments for diverticular disease.
- Define intussusception.
- Identify treatment initiatives for intussusception.
- Explain the pathophysiology of intestinal obstruction.
- Evaluate treatment initiatives for intestinal obstruction.
- Identify the pathophysiology of inguinal hernia.
- Discuss treatment for volvulus.
- Explain the pathophysiology of rectal prolapse.
- Describe treatment initiatives for hemorrhoids.
- Describe the signs and symptoms of intestinal polyps.
- Explain the etiology of proctitis.
- Describe the signs and symptoms of anorectal abscess and fistula.

Review of the anatomy of the gastrointestinal system

The gastrointestinal (GI) system consists of two major parts: the GI tract, also referred to as the alimentary canal, and the accessory organs. The alimentary canal is a long, hollow, muscular tube that begins in the mouth and ends at the anus. The alimentary canal includes the esophagus, stomach, small intestine, large intestine, rectum, and anal canal.

Diseases of the oral cavity

The oral cavity includes the gingival or gums, the buccal mucosa (the lining of the inside of the mouth), the area under the tongue, the hard palate (roof of the mouth), the area behind the wisdom teeth, and the front two-thirds of the tongue.

Diseases of the oral cavity

The oral cavity includes the gingival or gums, buccal mucosa (lining of the inside of the mouth), area under the tongue, hard palate (roof of the mouth), area behind wisdom teeth, and front two-thirds of tongue.

Stomatitis

Stomatitis is defined as an inflammation of the oral mucosa that may spread to the lips, palate and buccal mucosa. It is a common infection and generally classified as acute herpetic stomatitis or aphthous stomatitis.

Acute herpetic stomatitis is caused by infection of the herpes simplex virus and is common in children aged 1 to 3 years. It is usually self-limiting but can be severe, and even fatal, in neonates. Symptoms have an abrupt onset and include malaise, anorexia, irritability, mouth pain, and fever, which may last for one to two weeks. The patient’s gums are swollen, bleed easily, and the mucous membrane is painful. Ulcers develop in the mouth and throat that eventually acquire the appearance of “punched-out” lesions with red areolae. Pain usually ceases about two to four days before the ulcers are completely healed.

Treatment focuses on symptom relief. Saltwater mouth rinses, topical antihistamines, antacids or corticosteroids may be used to reduce discomfort. Bland or liquid diets may be recommended to reduce the discomfort of eating. In extreme cases, when the patient cannot ingest adequate amounts of food and/or liquids, intravenous therapy may be indicated.

Aphthous stomatitis causes burning, tingling and minimal swelling of the mucous membrane. Single or multiple superficial ulcers with white centers and red borders appear, heal at one site, but then form at other sites. The cause is unknown, and healing generally occurs spontaneously within 10 days to two weeks.

Miscellaneous infections

- Candidiasis (thrush): Fungal infection that causes cream or bluish-white patches of exudates to appear on the tongue, mouth, and/or pharynx. Persons at high risk include premature neonates, older adults, those with suppressed immune systems, persons taking antibiotics, or persons taking steroids for a long period of time. For infants, the oral mucosa is swabbed with nystatin after feedings because feedings wash away the medication. The mother should also be treated to avoid passing the infection back and forth. Older children and adults swish nystatin solutions around the mouth for a few minutes before swallowing it. Eating yogurt with active cultures may be helpful in treating the infection.

- Gingivitis: Inflammation of the gums. This condition can be an early warning sign of diabetes, blood dyscrasias and lack of vitamins. Gingivitis is occasionally due to the use of hormonal contraceptives. More often, it is due to poor oral hygiene, poorly fitting dentures or other irritants. Signs include redness, painless swelling, bleeding and evidence of gum detachment from teeth. Treatment includes elimination of triggering factors (e.g., improving the fit of dentures), regular dental check-ups, and good oral hygiene. Sometimes oral or topical corticosteroids are recommended.

- Glossitis: Inflammation of the tongue. It can be due to bacterial infection, irritation or injury, or a lack of vitamin B. Spicy foods, smoking and alcohol intake may also promote its development. The tongue becomes red, ulcerated or swollen to the point that the airway is obstructed. Swallowing is difficult and painful, as is chewing. Speech becomes impaired. Treatment focuses on eliminating the underlying cause. Regular dental checkups are important, and good oral hygiene should be encouraged.

- Periodontitis: Inflammation of the gums accompanied by recession and loosening of the teeth. Often due to poor dental hygiene, it is sometimes related to the use of hormonal contraceptives and may also be an early sign of diabetes, blood dyscrasias or vitamin insufficiency. Onset is abrupt. Signs include bright red swollen gums and loosening of the teeth. There may be evidence of systemic infection, such as the presence of fever and chills. Treatment includes initiating and maintaining good oral hygiene, participating in regular dental check-ups, and, if necessary, surgery to remove infected areas and prevent recurrence.
Vincent’s angina (trench mouth, ulcerative gingivitis): Painful, severe infection of the gums. It is caused by bacterial infection. Predisposing factors include stress, smoking, poor dietary habits and inadequate rest. Onset is abrupt. Signs include ulcers (covered by a grayish-white membrane) on the gums, bleeding, fatigue, mild fever, bad breath, painful swallowing or talking, enlarged lymph nodes. Treatment includes antibiotic therapy, removal of infected tissue, analgesics, hydrogen peroxide and water mouth rinses, rest and a soft diet.1

Cancer of the oral cavity
Cheri is a 45-year-old manager of an exclusive, upscale women’s boutique. She attends many social events related to business and drinks about two to three glasses of wine per day. Cheri smokes about half a pack of cigarettes per day as well. About a month ago, she noticed a painless white patch about 1 cm in diameter on the inside of her left cheek. Since it wasn’t causing any discomfort, Cheri dismissed it as “unimportant.” However, today she visited her dentist for her regular six-month check-up. He expressed concern and recommended that she have her family doctor evaluate the white patch. A biopsy showed that Cheri has oral cancer.

Cheri’s story is not uncommon. Nearly 36,000 Americans are diagnosed with oral or pharyngeal cancer every year. Of these 36,000 people, only a little more than half of them will still be alive in five years. About 8,000 Americans die from oral cancer every year. In fact, the death rate for oral cancer is greater than that of cancers that receive much more publicity, such as cervical cancer, Hodgkin’s lymphoma, skin cancer and thyroid cancer. Sadly, the high death rate is not because oral cancer is difficult to diagnosis, but because it is so often identified in its later stages.13

The risk factors for the development of oral cancer include:10,12,13
- Use of tobacco products,
- Frequent alcohol ingestion,
- Exposure to natural or artificial (e.g., tanning beds) sunlight over long periods of time,
- Infection with human papilloma virus (HPV). (Infection has been linked to some oral cancers.)
- Low intake of fruits and vegetables,
- Race: Oral cancer affects twice as many African-Americans as white Americans.

Historically, oral cancer occurred much more frequently in men, affecting six men for every woman. Today, however, the ratio has decreased to two men for every woman. It is believed that this is due to an increase in the number of women who smoke.13

Signs and symptoms of oral cancer include:10,12,13
- A sore in the mouth or on the lip that does not heal,
- A white or red patch in the mouth,
- A lump or thickening in the mouth or on the lip,
- Problems chewing or swallowing,
- A white or red patch in the mouth.

A sore in the mouth or on the lip that does not heal,
- Loose teeth or dentures that become uncomfortable or start to fit poorly,
- Change in the quality of the voice,
- Bleeding or pain of the mouth or lip,
- Swelling of the jaw,
- Feeling that something is caught in the throat.

Oral cancer is diagnosed in a variety of ways. A thorough physical exam is the first step. Suspicious areas are biopsied to determine whether malignant cells are present. X-rays of the head, neck and chest may be taken. Other diagnostic studies that may be helpful in diagnosing and staging of oral cancer include:10
- Endoscopy,
- MRI (magnetic resonance imaging),
- CT scan (CAT scan),
- PET scan (positron emission tomography scan).

Prognosis depends on the location of the cancer, the stage at diagnosis, and whether there is lymph node or blood vessel involvement.10 Treatment depends on the cancer stage and, depending on the patient’s age, strength, and general health, his ability to tolerate certain treatment initiatives. Treatment may consist of radiation therapy, surgery, chemotherapy, or a combination of these initiatives.11

Nursing alert! Persons who have had lip or oral cavity cancer are at an increased risk of developing a second cancer in the head or neck. Patients must have frequent, thorough follow-up.10

Disorders of the esophagus
The esophagus is a muscular tube about 10 to 13 inches in length and about ¾-inch wide in adults. It connects the pharynx to the stomach and is composed of several layers. One layer is a thick muscular band that contracts rhythmically to propel food to the stomach. The lower esophageal sphincter (LES), located at the bottom of the esophagus, prevents the reflux of stomach contents back into the stomach.4

Esophageal cancer
Esophageal cancer is an aggressive malignancy with a high mortality rate. Esophageal cancer is responsible for 1.5 percent to 2 percent of cancers diagnosed in the United States, and is the sixth leading cause of deaths caused by cancer throughout the world. Survival at five years is only about 16 percent. It is estimated that more than 16,000 new cases of esophageal cancer will be diagnosed annually.4

There are two main types of esophageal cancer: squamous cell carcinoma and adenocarcinoma. Squamous cell carcinoma is more common. However, there have been some recent changes in the incidence of the two main types of esophageal cancer. At one time, squamous cell carcinoma accounted for more than 90 percent of esophageal cancers. More recent statistics show that the number of adenocarcinomas is increasing drastically in the United States.4,5

Lee is a 55-year-old gentleman who arrived in the United States from Asia about 20 years ago. He is a heavy cigarette smoker and retains some of the dietary habits from his native land. His wife tells him that his voice is “different” and hoarse. Lee comments that he is having difficulty swallowing. These symptoms began several months ago and have become gradually, but steadily worse. Lee decides to visit his doctor, who suspects an esophageal disorder. A biopsy of esophageal tissue confirms suspicions of a malignancy.

Esophageal carcinoma is more common in men older than 50, and the risk increases with age. Almost half of all people diagnosed with esophageal cancer are older than 70. This type of cancer is about three and one-half times more common in men than in women, and its incidence is highest in African-American men.3 Esophageal cancer is most common in Japan, China, the Middle East and parts of South Africa. In the United States, the disease affects less than five in 100,000 people.3

The major risk factors for the development of esophageal squamous cell carcinoma are cigarette smoking and chronic heavy alcohol consumption. In Asian countries, certain dietary habits, such as chewing betel nuts and eating pickled vegetables, are associated with its development.4,5

Nursing alert! Recent research indicates that there may be a connection between certain types of human papilloma virus (HPV) and squamous cell esophageal cancer. More research is needed to validate this indication.4

Risk of the development of adenocarcinoma of the esophagus is associated with obesity and gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD). A patient who suffers from GERD, uses tobacco and is obese is at even greater risk as a result of this combination of factors.4

Nursing alert! Chronic GERD can lead to Barrett’s esophagus, a condition in which normal squamous cells of the esophagus are replaced with glandular cells. Barrett’s esophagus puts a patient at high risk for adenocarcinoma of the esophagus.4

Signs and symptoms of esophageal cancer are not particularly distinctive initially. Dysphagia and weight loss are the most common early symptoms. The dysphagia is mild and intermittent at first, but quickly becomes constant. Additional signs and symptoms include chest pain, hoarseness, coughing and the feeling that something is caught in the throat or chest.4,5

Unfortunately, there are no specific screening guidelines for esophageal cancer. Patients at significantly high risk, such as persons who have Barrett’s esophagus, often have periodic examination via upper endoscopy.4

Diagnosis is confirmed via endoscopic examination of the esophagus (esophagogastroduodenoscopy), punch and brush biopsies of suspicious areas, and exfoliative cytologic tests. Magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) of the chest and thoracic region and
CT scans are used to help determine disease staging. Unfortunately, the majority of cases are diagnosed at Stage III or Stage IV involving tumors that invade the outermost layer of the esophagus and regional lymph node involvement. Sites of metastasis are most often the liver, lung, stomach, kidney, bone and brain.4,5

Treatment usually involves a combination of surgery and chemotherapy. Surgical removal of the affected areas of the esophagus and part of the stomach is usually indicated. Efforts are made to maintain a passageway for food by connecting the upper part of the esophagus to the remaining part of the stomach, thus pulling the stomach up into the chest area. If this is not possible, it may be necessary for the patient to have a feeding gastrostomy.4,5

After surgery, the patient will have chest tubes, a nasogastric (NG) tube, intravenous therapy, an indwelling urinary catheter and supplemental oxygen as needed. The NG tube will remain in place for about five to seven days after surgery. It is used for decompression to facilitate healing of the anastomosis between the stomach and the esophagus.4,5

Because esophageal surgery involves the pericardium area, there is an increased risk for cardiac arrhythmias post-operatively. Cardiac status must be meticulously monitored.4

Chemotherapy may also be part of the treatment regimen. Current research indicates that chemotherapy in combination with radiation therapy improves outcomes, although chemotherapy may be used alone. Usual chemotherapeutic agents are 5-fluorouracil or cisplatin.4,5

Radiation therapy in conjunction with chemotherapy may be used when surgery is not an option because of the patient’s refusal to undergo surgery or because the patient’s general health is so poor that he is not able to tolerate surgery. Radiation may also be used as a palliative measure in advanced cases of esophageal cancer. There are a number of adverse occurrences associated with external beam radiation to the esophagus. Fatigue and skin breakdown are among the most common. Other side effects from radiation may include: 5,15
- Potential damage to the heart, lungs and spinal cord.
- Esophagitis or inflammation of the esophagus. This can adversely affect swallowing, making it difficult for the patient to eat. He may need nutritional supplements if he is not able to maintain adequate nutrient intake.
- Esophageal fistula formation. Tissue breakdown from radiation may cause an opening between the esophagus and areas adjacent to it. GI contents leak out of the opening, which can cause serious infection or injury. For example, a fistula to the lung can cause GI contents to move into the lung, and may be fatal.
- Formation of esophageal strictures. Such strictures can be a late radiation side effect. If there is tissue stenosis of the esophagus, the subsequent shrinkage makes it difficult for the patient to swallow. Esophageal dilation may be necessary (on more than one occasion) to maintain a patent esophagus.
- The effects of surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy make patients particularly susceptible to compromised nutritional status. Patients must be closely monitored for nutritional problems, including:4,5
  - Food aspiration: Make sure that the patient is in Fowler’s position for meals. He should be encouraged to eat slowly to reduce the possibility of aspiration. Some food regurgitation is likely, so his mouth should be cleaned after each meal.
  - Dumping syndrome: A disorder that most patients who have undergone surgery experience to some extent. Dumping syndrome occurs when undigested food rapidly leaves the stomach and moves into the small intestine. Dumping syndrome causes nausea, cramps, tachycardia and light-headedness. It is believed that the cause of dumping syndrome is related to the smaller size of the stomach after surgery and diversion of the vagus nerve.
  - Delayed gastric emptying: In contrast to dumping syndrome, sometimes food moves too slowly through the GI tract after surgery. Because the patient’s stomach is now in the chest area that already contains other organs, food may back up from this crowded space.
  - Reflux of gastric contents: Patients who have had surgery for esophageal cancer have had the esophageal sphincter removed, making reflux a fairly common problem. Patients should not eat close to bedtime. They should elevate the head of the bed or sleep on several pillows. Medications that function as proton pump inhibitors (e.g. Nexium) may help to control symptoms of reflux.

Patients and families need significant emotional support as well as assistance with the patient’s physical needs. Prognosis is generally not good, and, as the disease progresses, information about home health assistance or hospice may be needed. Organizations that may be of help include the American Cancer Society (www.cancer.org), 1-800-227-2345 and the Esophageal Cancer Awareness Association (www.ecaware.org), 1-800-601-0613.

Mallory-Weiss syndrome
Mallory-Weiss syndrome is characterized by esophageal bleeding from a mucosal tear in the esophagus as the result of forceful vomiting or retching.5,15 Although such bleeding usually occurs after multiple episodes of vomiting or retching, it can happen after only a single episode.5,15

Mallory-Weiss syndrome is responsible for about 1 percent to 15 percent of all episodes of upper gastrointestinal bleeding in adults in the United States. It is far less common in children, accounting for less than 5 percent of all upper GI bleeding episodes. Mallory-Weiss syndrome is two to four times more common in men than in women.5,15

Factors that predispose persons to this syndrome include:5,15
- Ulcers.
- Infectious gastroenteritis.
- Pregnancy.
- Hepatitis.
- Cirrhosis.
- Gall bladder disease.
- Renal disease.

The onset of Mallory-Weiss syndrome usually begins with vomiting blood or passing copious amounts of blood through the rectum a few hours to several days following forceful vomiting. The bleeding may range in amounts from mild to massive. Excessive bleeding is more likely to occur when the esophageal tear is near the cardia and may swiftly lead to death.5

Treatment depends on the severity of blood loss. Bleeding usually stops spontaneously and simply requires supportive care and monitoring. However, severe blood loss or blood loss that is continuous may require: 5,15
- Blood transfusions.
- Administration of proton pump inhibitors or histamine-2 receptor antagonists.
- Administration of vasoconstrictors to decrease blood flow in the esophagus.
- Application of esophageal clips at the site of active bleeding.

Patients and families should be helped to identify predisposing factors and how to avoid them. A careful health history should be taken with careful analysis of dietary habits, medications taken and alcohol intake. Patients should avoid aspirin products and alcohol.5

Esophageal diverticula
Esophageal diverticula are out-pouchings or sacs of one or more layers of the esophagus. Although they can occur in infants and children, they are generally a problem later in life and are more common in men than in women.5

Esophageal diverticula are the result of muscular abnormalities caused by congenital or inflammatory processes. There are three main types of esophageal diverticula:5
1. Zenker’s diverticulum: Occurs near the upper esophageal sphincter and is the most common of the three types.
2. Traction or mid-esophageal diverticulum: Occurs near the midpoint of the esophagus.
3. Epiphrenic diverticulum: Occurs just above the lower esophageal sphincter.

Zenker’s diverticulum produces throat irritation followed by dysphagia and nearly complete obstruction. Food regurgitation is common and may even lead to aspiration of food and resulting pulmonary infections. Treatment measures include a bland diet, teaching the patient to chew his food thoroughly and eat slowly, and to...
drink water after eating to “flush out” the out-pouchings or sacs.5

Nursing alert! Severe symptoms or a large Zenker’s diverticulum may require surgery to remove the sac.3

A mid-esophageal diverticulum, which seldom produces symptoms except for occasional dysphagia and heartburn, requires intervention only if there is risk of diverticulum rupture. Interventions include administration of antacids and measures to prevent reflux such as sitting upright for two hours after eating, eating small meals, avoiding tight clothing, and controlling chronic cough.5

Epiphrenic diverticulum is generally accompanied by some type of motor disorder, such as spasm. It is necessary to treat the underlying cause. For example, medications may be administered to control spasms. Surgical excision of the diverticulum may be required in cases of severe pain or dysphagia.5

Gastroesophageal reflux disease
Mrs. Dasher is a 75-year-old retired biology teacher. She is taking verapamil, a calcium-channel blocker, and a low-dose aspirin daily since she suffered a mild heart attack five years ago. During a routine doctor’s visit, Mrs. Dasher mentions that she has been suffering from severe “heartburn” for the past several months, “especially after my fourth or fifth cup of coffee.” Mrs. Dasher needs to be evaluated for GERD.

Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), often referred to as “heartburn,” is the backflow of gastric and/or duodenal contents into the esophagus past the lower esophageal sphincter (LES). This backflow is not accompanied by belching or vomiting.5,9 Many people, even health care professionals, sometimes dismiss “heartburn” as a minor annoyance. However, ongoing reflux may cause inflammation of the esophageal mucosa and complications such as esophageal ulcers, strictures, or Barrett’s esophagus.3 It is important that all reports of “heartburn” be carefully evaluated.

Incidence
Data show that 25 percent to 40 percent of Americans report symptoms of GERD at some time in their lives, and 7 percent to 10 percent report that they experience symptoms every day. It may be that the actual percentage is even higher because a significant number of people may be self-medicating with over-the-counter preparations and never report their symptoms.5 GERD tends to be chronic, and relapse is common. Thus many patients require long-term medication maintenance therapy.16

GERD is often thought of as an “adult” problem. Research shows, however, that GERD is actually common in infants and children. Repeated vomiting, coughing and respiratory problems may be indicative of GERD in this population. Most infants grow out of GERD by the time they are 1 year old and their digestive systems have matured.5

Pathophysiology/etiology
Under normal conditions, the LES sustains enough pressure around the lower end of the esophagus to close it, thus preventing reflux of gastric and/or duodenal contents. The sphincter relaxes after every swallow to permit food to pass into the stomach. In GERD, the sphincter does not remain closed. This is generally due to inadequate LES pressure or if pressure in the stomach propels gastric contents into the esophagus. Stomach contents are very acidic, thus causing pain and irritation when they move into the esophagus. The esophageal mucosa becomes inflamed, which can decrease LES pressure more and more until there is a recurrent cycle of reflux and heartburn.9

Risk factors
There are a number of factors that predispose the development of GERD. These include:5,9

- Pyloric surgery.
- Nasogastric (NG) tube intubation for more than four days.
- Hiatal hernia.
- Conditions that increase abdominal pressure, such as pregnancy, obesity, persistent vomiting or coughing.
- Medications such as calcium channel blockers, morphine, diazepam, anticholinergics and meperidine.
- Alcohol.
- Cigarettes.
- Orange juice.
- Tomatoes.
- Whole milk.
- Peppermint.
- Chocolate.

Signs and symptoms
The most common presenting symptom of GERD is burning pain in the epigastric area, commonly referred to as “heartburn.” The pain may radiate to the arms and chest and even to the neck and jaw.5,9 Some patients may think that they are having a heart attack. The pain often occurs after a meal or when lying down. Patients may complain of feelings of fluid accumulation in the throat.9 A chronic cough may develop as a result of the reflux of gastric contents into the throat. There may also be hoarseness upon awakening in the morning.5

Diagnosis
Diagnostic tests focus on identifying the underlying cause of GERD. In addition to a careful history and physical, a number of specific tests are conducted.

- Esophageal acidity test: Assesses the competence of the LES and measures reflux.5,9
- Acid perfusion test: Determines whether reflux is the cause of the problem and distinguishes it from cardiac problems.9
- Esophagoscopy: Used to evaluate the extent of the disease and identify pathologic changes.5
- Barium swallow: Used to identify hiatal hernia as a causative factor or esophageal stricture as a complication of GERD.9

- Upper GI series: Used to identify the presence of a hiatal hernia or motility problems.9

Esophageal manometry is another diagnostic test useful in evaluating GERD. Also called esophageal motility, esophageal manometry measures the strength and function of the esophagus as well as the musculature of the throat and esophagus. Its most common use is to assess the LES in patients with GERD. The test takes about 45 minutes from beginning to end.14

The patient is NPR for six hours prior to the test. The nostrils and throat are numbed with a topical anesthetic. The patient is placed in an upright position, and a thin, flexible tube is passed through the nostril, down the throat, and into the esophagus and stomach while the patient swallows water. Esophageal muscle pressure, movement, coordination and strength are assessed. Esophageal sphincters are also evaluated.14

Treatment
Treatment goals are:1

- To control symptoms.
- To promote healing of the esophagus.
- To prevent or manage complications.

Symptom control focuses primarily on lifestyle modifications.

- Dietary habits: Avoid foods that trigger GERD symptoms, such as caffeine products, chocolate, spicy food, carbonated beverages, orange juice, alcohol, onions, fatty foods, tomato juice and tomato sauce. Avoid eating large meals, which put pressure on the LES. It is better to eat small frequent meals rather than three large meals.1,5
- Positioning: Patients should not lie down for two hours after eating. Sleep with the head of the bed raised six to eight inches. A flat position puts pressure on the LES.5
- Weight: Obesity increases abdominal pressure, which pushes gastric contents up into the esophagus. Even a moderate weight loss can help reduce symptoms.1,5
- Smoking: Nicotine not only relaxes the esophageal sphincter, it promotes the production of gastric acid. Smoking irritates the esophagus and can reduce the effectiveness of digestion by decreasing gastric motility.1,5
- Alcohol use: Alcohol increases gastric acid production and decreases LES pressure.5
- Stress: Stress itself does not cause GERD. However, stress can cause individuals to drink, smoke or overeat, which can trigger GERD symptoms.1,5

Lifestyle modifications can promote healing of the esophagus and control symptoms. Many patients, however, also take medications for the treatment of GERD. These include:

- Antacids that neutralize acidic gastric contents.9
- Foaming agents (such as Gaviscon) that prevent reflux.9
- H2 blockers that reduce the amount of gastric acid production.1,9
Nursing alert! H2 blockers eliminate symptoms in about 50 percent of patients, but remission is maintained in only about 25 percent of patients.1

Protein pump inhibitors (PPIs) limit gastric acid secretion and facilitate rapid resolution of symptoms and esophageal healing in 80-90 percent of patients. Examples of fairly recently approved PPIs include Prilosec, Nexium and Kapidex. Kapidex, for example, is a delayed-release capsule taken once a day orally for the treatment of heartburn associated with symptomatic, erosive esophagitis, and maintenance of healed erosive esophagitis. Kapidex is the first PPI with a dual-delayed release formulation. It is intended to provide two separate occurrences of medication release.15

Within the last several years, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has approved some new devices for the treatment of GERD. These include:9

- Bard EndoCinch system: An endoscopic device that puts stitches in the LES to make it stronger. This device is inserted for chronic GERD.
- Stretta system: Electrodes make tiny cuts on the LES via an endoscopic device. As the cuts heal, resulting scar tissue makes the LES stronger.
- Enteryx: A solution that is injected during an endoscopy. It becomes “spongy” to support the LES and prevent reflux. This procedure is approved for patients with GERD who respond to proton pump inhibitors.

Patient education is very important to the control of GERD symptoms and its treatment. Some important teaching topics include the following:5,15

- Positioning: Teach patients to sit upright and avoid lying down for two hour after eating. Patients should sleep with their heads elevated at least six to eight inches. Teach them that flat positions place increased pressure on the LES.
- Clothing: Patients need to avoid constricting clothing, such as tight belts, girdles and other types of garments that cinch the waist.
- Weight: A weight-loss program may be indicated. Extra weight increases abdominal pressure that pushes stomach contents up into the esophagus. Patients should not simply be told to lose weight. They should have a dietary consult and, as appropriate, be placed on a medically supervised weight loss program.
- Diet: It may be helpful to initiate a dietary consult for patients with GERD. Patients should be counseled to eat small, frequent meals rather than three large meals and to avoid eating before going to bed. Foods such as caffeine, chocolate, spicy foods, citrus juices, tomato sauce and alcohol all stimulate gastric acid production and should be consumed in very limited quantities.

- Smoking: Nicotine products stimulate gastric acid production, relax the esophageal sphincter and reduce digestion effectiveness. Patients should be referred to smoking cessation programs. Many patients need the help and support of organized programs to stop using nicotine products.
- Medication: Patients need to be taught about the medications they take, the importance of taking them, and any medication side effects that may occur.

In addition to helping patients adhere to their treatment regimen, nurses must be alert, and teach their patients to be alert, to the possibility of developing a potentially fatal disease closely associated with GERD: Barrett’s esophagus. Barrett’s esophagus is a disorder characterized by the replacement of “normal” tissue that lines the esophagus with tissue similar to the lining of the intestine. This is referred to as intestinal metaplasia. Barrett’s esophagus does not produce signs or symptoms. Its cause is unknown, but it is often found in persons with GERD. The disorder affects about 1 percent of adults in the United States. It affects men about twice as often as women, and Caucasian men are diagnosed more often than men of other races.11

It is estimated that about 10 percent to 15 percent of patients with chronic GERD symptoms develop Barrett’s esophagus. Because there are no specific signs and symptoms, physicians may recommend that patients over the age of 40 who have a lengthy history of GERD be screened for Barrett’s.18

Why is such a recommendation made for a disorder that causes no signs or symptoms? The answer is that a small percentage (less than 1 percent annually) of patients with Barrett’s esophagus develop a rare, often deadly form of cancer called esophageal adenocarcinoma. Because of the lack of symptoms, this cancer is often not detected until it is in an advanced stage.11

Barrett’s esophagus is diagnosed via an upper endoscopy and biopsy. After insertion of the endoscopic tube, the physician can inspect the lining of the esophagus and note the presence of abnormal lining. However, a biopsy of the lining of the esophagus is necessary to confirm the presence of a malignancy.18

There are several treatment options for Barrett’s esophagus with severe dysplasia or malignancy. The focus of these options is destroying or removing the section of the lining that has dysplasia or is cancerous. Two endoscopic therapies may be used to treat Barrett’s esophagus under these conditions.

- Photodynamic therapy (PDT): Photofrin (a light-sensitizing agent) and a laser are used to kill precancerous and cancerous cells. Photofrin is injected into a vein. Forty-eight hours later, the laser light is passed through an endoscope and the Photofrin is activated, thus destroying the affected tissue of the esophagus.11

- Endoscopic mucosal resection (EMR): During an EMR, the Barrett’s lining is lifted up and a solution is injected under it, or suction is applied to it. Then the affected lining is incised and removed through the endoscope. Complications can include bleeding or tearing of the esophagus. EMR may be performed in conjunction with PDT.11

Surgical removal of the majority of the esophagus may be recommended in cases of severe dysplasia or malignancy. The surgery is extensive, and older or debilitated patients may not be able to tolerate it. Surgery may, however, offer the best hope of a cure. Surgery generally involves removal of most of the esophagus and pulling a portion of the stomach up into the chest and attaching it to the remainder of the esophagus.11

Research into the cause and treatment of Barrett’s esophagus is necessary. The National Institute for Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (http://www2.niddk.nih.gov) and the National Cancer Institute (www.cancer.gov) are involved with such research. For information about current research projects visit www.ClinicalTrials.gov.11

Hiatal hernia

The word hernia refers to a condition that exists when an internal body part moves or “pushes” into anywhere it does not actually belong.16 Hiatal hernia, also referred to as hiatus hernia, is a deficiency or defect in the diaphragm that allows part of the stomach to pass through the opening in the diaphragm into the chest.5

There are two types of hiatal hernia:

1. Sliding hernia: The stomach and the gastroesophageal junction slip up into the chest.5

2. Paraesophageal hernia: A portion of the greater curvature of the stomach moves through the defect in the diaphragm.5

Etiology

Hiatal hernia is generally due to muscle weakening that occurs with the aging process. It may also be due to injury, trauma or being secondary to esophageal cancer. Increased abdominal pressure caused by coughing, straining during bowel movements, pregnancy or significant weight gain may also contribute to the development of hiatal hernia.5,19

Incidence

Hiatal hernia risk increases with age and occurs most often in persons over the age of 40. It occurs more often in women than in men and in persons who smoke and who are overweight.5,19

Signs and symptoms

A paraesophageal does not usually cause symptoms. It is generally found almost “accidentally” during a barium swallow or similar diagnostic tests. Because the stomach is displaced or stretched, there may be feelings of fullness in the chest or chest pain similar to angina.5,7 This type of hernia requires surgical intervention because there is danger of strangulation of the stomach as it becomes caught above the diaphragm.5
A sliding hernia that does not produce symptoms does not require treatment. However, if the sliding hernia does produce symptoms, they are usually similar to gastric reflux. Such symptoms include heartburn, chest pain due to reflux of gastric contents, dysphagia, and bleeding.5,7

A potentially severe complication of parasophageal hernia is severe pain and shock due to incarceration. Incarceration occurs when a portion of the stomach is caught above the diaphragm and can lead to gastric perforation and strangulation and even gangrene of that portion of the stomach. Emergency surgery is necessary if this complication occurs.7

Diagnosis
Diagnosis of hiatal hernia is confirmed via various diagnostic studies. A barium swallow may show a hernia as an outpouching at the lower portion of the esophagus. However, small hernias may be difficult to detect. Endoscopic studies allow the examiner to identify hiatal hernias and other gastroesophageal problems.5

Treatment
Asymptomatic hiatal hernias may not require any treatment.19 However, sliding hernias may produce symptoms of gastric reflux similar to those of GERD. In this case, treatment focuses on relieving and controlling symptoms through the use of medications, avoiding constriction clothing, eating small, frequent meals instead of three large ones, and avoiding alcohol, spicy foods, tomato juices, citrus juices and nicotine products.5 For details about reducing symptoms produced by gastric reflux see the preceding section on GERD.

Surgical intervention is necessary if the hiatal hernia has the potential to become constricted or strangulated. In this case, the hiatal hernia must be “reduced” or put back in its proper place.19 The surgeon may have to make an incision in the abdomen or thoracic area, but may also be able to repair the hernia by laparoscopic surgery, which is much less invasive and shortens the period of time necessary for recovery.5

Laparoscopic surgery involves making about five or six abdominal incisions about five to 10 millimeters in length. Surgical instruments as well as the laparoscope are inserted through the incisions. The surgeon is able to repair the hernia by viewing the internal organs via the laparoscope. Patients are usually able to ambulate the day after surgery, eat a normal diet and resume regular activities within a week. Heavy lifting should be avoided for several weeks.19

Nursing alert! There is no complete assurance that the condition will not reoccur, even with surgical intervention.19

Because of the possibility of reoccurrence, patients must be taught to recognize the warning signs of the life-threatening complication of hernia strangulation. These signs include severe chest or abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting, or inability to have a bowel movement or pass gas.19

Gastritis
Gastritis is a common condition characterized by inflammation of the lining of the stomach.20 Gastritis may be acute or chronic. In most people, gastritis is not serious. However, some people may develop gastric ulcers and increases the risk for stomach cancer.20

Acute gastritis has an abrupt onset and causes reddening of the gastric mucosa, edema, hemorrhage and erosion. Chronic gastritis is generally common in the elderly and in people who have pernicious anemia, although either acute or chronic gastritis can occur at any age. Chronic gastritis causes all stomach mucosal layers to become inflamed.3

Pathophysiology and etiology
When the stomach’s protective layer is weakened or injured, gastric digestive juices penetrate the stomach and damage and inflame the gastric lining. There are several factors that can damage the stomach’s protective layer and predispose a person to the development of gastritis.20

- **Bacterial infection**: Helicobacter pylori (H. pylori) is a common cause of chronic gastritis. It is estimated that 50 percent of the world’s population is infected with this bacterium, but the majority of those infected do not experience any gastric complications. However, in some people, bacteria break down the gastric protective lining and gastritis occurs. It is not known why some people are susceptible to gastritis and others are not, but some experts believe that lifestyle choices, such as smoking and high alcohol intake, may increase the risk of development of the problem.20

- **Drug use**: Regular use of drugs such as aspirin and other non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ibuprofen (e.g., Advil) and naproxen (Aleve) can cause both acute and chronic gastritis. Such drugs should not be taken more than is necessary.5,20

- **Alcohol use**: Alcohol has the potential to irritate and erode the lining of the stomach, increasing the risk of gastritis. Ingesting excessive amounts of alcohol is more often linked to acute gastritis.20

- **Smoking**: Nicotine products irritate gastric lining and can lead to chronic gastritis.5,20

- **Older age**: The risk of gastritis increases with age because the gastric lining of older adults generally thins with age, and older people are more likely to be infected with H. pylori.20

- **Bile reflux disease**: Under normal conditions, bile is released from the gallbladder and enters the small intestine where it assists in the digestion of fats. The pyloric valve prevents bile from traveling into the stomach from the small intestine. However, if the valve fails to work properly, bile can flow into the stomach, causing irritation, inflammation and, eventually, chronic gastritis.20

- **Autoimmune gastritis**: This is a rare form of gastritis that occurs when the patient’s own body “attacks” the cells of the lining of the stomach. When this happens, the body’s immune system reacts to these attacks, and the stomach lining is damaged. This form of gastritis is more common in persons who have other autoimmune disorders.20

- **Various disease processes and events**: Certain diseases and events can predispose someone to gastritis. The stress of major surgery, trauma, burns or severe infections can trigger acute gastritis. Chronic gastritis may be associated with pernicious anemia, kidney or liver disease, peptic ulcer disease and diseases of the pancreas.2,20

**Signs and symptoms**
Signs and symptoms of acute gastritis are abrupt in onset and include indigestion, abdominal cramps, nausea, vomiting and hematemesis (bloody vomit). These signs and symptoms can last from a few hours to several days.5

Chronic gastritis may produce similar signs and symptoms or may cause only mild discomfort such as slight pain or an inability to tolerate fatty or spicy foods. Patients with chronic gastritis may not have any signs or symptoms at all.5

Diagnosis
There are several diagnostic tests used to confirm a diagnosis of gastritis.

- **Upper gastrointestinal endoscopy**: This allows visualization of the stomach lining and removal of tissue samples for biopsy.5,20

- **Tests for occult blood**: Stools and vomitus can be tested for the presence of blood, indicating gastric bleeding.5,10

- **Blood tests**: Hemoglobin and hematocrit levels are assessed to determine whether the patient has developed anemia from gastric bleeding.5

**Treatment**
Treatment focuses on eliminating the cause that triggers the gastritis. Antibiotics are administered to treat bacterial gastritis. Histamine-2 receptor antagonists are given to block gastric secretions. Over-the-counter antacids may be administered to buffer the effects of the acidity of gastric secretions. If antacids do not provide adequate relief, acid blockers such as cimetidine (Tagamet), ranitidine (Zantac) or famotidine (Pepcid) may be prescribed. In the event of severe blood loss, blood replacement may be necessary.5,20

Lifestyle changes may also be helpful in reducing the signs and symptoms of gastritis.

- **Diet**: Patients should avoid foods that trigger or exacerbate signs and symptoms, such as fatty or spicy foods. Eating small, frequent meals may be better tolerated than three large meals a day. A dietary consult may be helpful in assisting the patient to adopt or maintain a healthy diet.5,20

- **Alcohol intake**: Patients should limit or avoid alcohol, which can trigger or exacerbate signs and symptoms.5,20

- **Smoking**: Patients should avoid using nicotine products. Smoking increases gastric acid, delays gastric healing and increases the
risk of not only gastritis but of gastric cancer as well.20

♦ **Weight**: Patients should maintain a healthy weight. Digestive problems are more common in overweight people than those who are of normal weight.20

♦ **Exercise**: Exercise helps all body systems to function at their highest potential. Exercise also aids in proper digestion. Patients should consult with their physicians before beginning an exercise program.20

**Gastroenteritis**

A "stomach flu" is prevalent in a small college town. Denise, a 20-year-old college sophomore, develops abdominal cramps, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea, which lasts for about 24 hours. Denise makes a speedy recovery, and is back attending classes within 48 hours of the onset of symptoms.

Denise’s 1-year-old cousin, Jason, also develops similar signs and symptoms. After several hours of vomiting and diarrhea, Jason becomes dehydrated and is taken to the local hospital. He is admitted and given intravenous fluids. Jason recovers quickly and is able to go home the next day.

Denise’s 85-year-old grandfather also develops gastrointestinal "flu" symptoms. After experiencing severe vomiting and diarrhea for nearly 24 hours, he becomes severely dehydrated and exhibits confusion and decreasing levels of consciousness. He is rushed to the hospital and is admitted in critical condition.

The preceding examples show that what is often referred to as a mild illness can, in fact, have devastating consequences. Gastroenteritis is generally a self-limiting illness characterized by irritation and inflammation of the stomach and intestines, which produces nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and abdominal cramping.21 The very young and the very old are especially susceptible to complications of this disease as are people who are in a debilitated state. As shown in the introductory examples, the very young and the elderly can quickly become severely dehydrated and also experience electrolyte imbalances as a result of vomiting and diarrhea. These populations must be carefully monitored and may require emergency medical intervention to restore fluid and electrolyte balance.5,9

Gastroenteritis, which affects all age groups, is commonly referred to as intestinal flu, traveler’s diarrhea or viral enteritis.5 In the United States, the disease ranks second only to the common cold as the leading cause of lost work time due to illness and is actually the fifth leading cause of death in young children.5

**Causes**

There are a number of causes of gastroenteritis. Here are some of the most common.

♦ **Bacteria**: There are several types of bacteria that cause gastroenteritis. Escherichia coli, salmonella and Staphylococcus aureus are common examples. They can cause food poisoning and traveler’s diarrhea (from contaminated food and unclean water).5,21

♦ **Amebae**: Entamoeba histolytica are one of the most common types of amebae that can cause gastroenteritis.5

♦ **Viruses**: Viral outbreaks can also cause traveler’s diarrhea and spread rapidly through close contact. In fact, 30-40 percent of cases of gastroenteritis in children are viral in nature.21

♦ **Medication reactions**: Adverse reactions to drugs such as antibiotics may trigger gastroenteritis. Other drugs that may trigger the problem include aspirin, steroids, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs and caffeine.5,21

♦ **Food allergies**: Food allergies can trigger the gastroenteritis.21

♦ **Ingestion of poisons or heavy metals**: Poisonous substances and water contaminated with heavy metals such as lead and mercury can trigger gastroenteritis.5,21

**Symptoms**

Signs and symptoms of gastroenteritis vary depending on the cause, age and general health of the person affected. Typical symptoms include:5,21

- Low grade fever (less than 100 degrees F).
- Nausea.
- Vomiting.
- Diarrhea.
- Malaise.

The disease is usually self-limiting with complete recovery. However, in severe cases, it may be necessary to seek emergency medical attention. If blood is present in vomit or stool, vomiting or diarrhea lasts more than 48 hours, a fever greater than 101 degrees F is present, the abdomen is swollen, abdominal pain is in the right lower abdominal quadrant or signs of fluid and electrolyte imbalance are present, the patient should seek immediate medical attention.21

**Nursing alert!** Remain alert to the signs and symptoms of dehydration and electrolyte imbalance, especially in children, the elderly and debilitated patients.

Signs and symptoms of dehydration include:22

- Thirst.
- Poor skin turgor.
- Dry skin.
- Fever.
- Dizziness.
- Weakness.
- Elevated heart rate.
- Decreased blood pressure.
- Changes in mental status.
- Seizures.
- Coma.

Changes in mental status, seizures, and coma require immediate emergency intervention. Common electrolyte imbalances that can occur with severe vomiting and diarrhea are hypernatremia (elevated sodium) and hypokalemia (low potassium). Electrolyte imbalances are more common in infants and children and the elderly.

**Symptoms of hypernatremia** include:22

- Low-grade fever.
- Flushed skin.
- Weakness.
- Lethargy.
- Tremors.
- Confusion.
- Seizures.
- Coma.

**Symptoms of hypokalemia** include:22

- Weakness, especially in the legs.
- Leg cramps.
- Arrhythmias.
- Rapid heart rate.

**Treatment**

In most cases, treatment is supportive until the signs and symptoms resolve themselves. Patients need rest and nutritional support. Lost fluid and electrolytes can be replaced with broth, ginger ale, ice chips and lemonade as tolerated. Milk and milk products should be avoided because they may exacerbate vomiting and diarrhea.5

Patients and their families should be taught preventive measures to reduce the risk of gastroenteritis. These measures include:5,22

- Encourage frequent hand washing.
- Patients should be taught to avoid touching their eyes, nose and mouth because germs are easily spread via these routes.
- When traveling to foreign countries, teach patients to avoid drinking water or eating raw fruits and vegetables.
- Explain the importance of cooking food thoroughly and refrigerating perishable foods such as dairy products, mayonnaise and cream.

**Gastric cancer**

Once the second most common cancer in the world, the rates of gastric or stomach cancer have significantly decreased in most developed countries.23 This malignancy affects all races, but there are some unexplained geographic and cultural variations in incidence. There is a higher mortality rate in Japan, Iceland, Chile and Austria. Over the past 25 years, the incidence of gastric cancer in the United States has decreased by 50 percent, and the death rate is one-third what it was 30 years ago.

Incidence is actually one-third of what it was 30 years ago. Incidence in Hispanic native and African-Americans is twice that compared to whites, and generally higher in men over the age of 40. Gastric cancer is more common in people with type A blood compared to those with type O blood. Prognosis depends on the stage of the disease at diagnosis, but the overall-five-year survival rate is about 19 percent.8

About 50 percent of stomach cancers are located in the pyloric area, but any area may be affected. Gastric cancer travels quickly to regional lymph nodes, liver and lungs.5
Causes
The exact cause of gastric cancer is not known. However, a number of factors have been identified that are associated with the disease.

- **Diet:** Diets high in foods that are pickled, smoked or salted seem related to the development of gastric cancer. Red meat, especially if barbecued or cooked “well-done,” is linked to an increased risk of cancer.2,21
- **Smoking:** Smoking is associated with an increased risk for gastric cancer. If smoking is discontinued, the risk decreases.2,23,24
- **Bacterial infection:** Chronic infection with Helicobacter pylori (H. pylori) is associated with a significant risk of gastric cancer. It is believed that this infection increases gastric inflammation and predisposes the development of gastric cancer.2,21
- **Previous gastric surgery:** Retrogressive research studies indicate that previous gastric surgery increases the risk of gastric cancer. It is believed that the surgery changes the normal pH of the stomach, which may cause potentially malignant changes in gastric cells.20
- **Genetic predisposition:** It is estimated that about 10 percent of gastric cancers have a genetic link.21
- **Alcohol:** Alcohol may cause alterations in gastric cells that ultimately trigger the development of cancer.2

Signs and symptoms
Signs and symptoms are not specific and may indicate a number of other conditions. Early symptoms include chronic dyspepsia (indigestion), heartburn and epigastric discomfort. Later signs and symptoms include weight loss, anorexia, anemia, fatigue and a feeling of fullness after eating. There may also be blood in stools.1

**Nursing alert!** Because early symptoms may not seem serious to patients, they may ignore them or self-medicate themselves with antacids to reduce epigastric or gastric discomfort.2 Patients should be encouraged to report all symptoms to their health care providers as soon as possible.

Diagnosis
Because a number of other gastric problems can mimic gastric cancer, it is necessary to confirm the diagnosis via specific diagnostic studies.

- **Esophagogastroduodenoscopy:** Allows visualization of the esophagus, stomach and duodenum (first part of the small intestine). It has a 95 percent diagnostic accuracy, provides a permanent color photographic record of any lesions or suspicious areas, and is the primary way to obtain a tissue specimen for biopsy.2,21
- **Barium x-rays:** These are x-rays of the gastrointestinal tract (GI) and are obtained to show problems such as tumors, filling defects, loss of gastric flexibility and abnormalities in the gastric mucosa.4
- **Gastric acid stimulation test:** Determines whether the stomach is secreting gastric acid properly.3
- **CT scan and/or MRI:** Conducted to view chest, abdomen and pelvis to assess not only local disease but also to identify possible areas of metastasis.21
- **Endoscopic ultrasound:** Conducted to assess preoperative tumor stage.21

**Treatment**
Surgery is generally the treatment of choice. The malignant area(s) are removed, and if the surgeon is able to determine clear margins surrounding the cancerous area(s), some of the stomach may be left in place. However, depending on the extent of the disease, it may be necessary to perform a total gastrectomy. The patient who has a partial gastric resection may eventually be able to eat normally. However, the patient who has a total gastrectomy will have a slow recovery and the ability to eat a normal diet is limited. After total gastrectomy, patients must eat small meals for the rest of their lives.3

**Nursing alert!** Factors that are necessary to vitamin B12 absorption are part of gastric secretions. Life-long replacement vitamin and iron supplements are necessary for patients who have had gastrectomies.7

In 2009, clinical studies of the breast cancer drug trastuzumab (Herceptin) showed that it improved the survival of patients with advanced gastric cancer. Adding Herceptin to standard chemotherapy helped patients survive longer than patients who received chemotherapy alone.28

**Appendicitis**
Daniel is a 22-year-old college senior. He and a group of friends are studying for final exams when he begins to complain of pain in the right lower quadrant. He tells his friends that he has a “side ache!” As their study session progresses, the pain becomes worse and Daniel is doubled over in pain. His friends decide to take him to the campus infirmary. The nurse on duty listens to Daniel’s complaints and finds rebound tenderness over his right lower abdomen. She arranges for Daniel to be immediately transferred to the local hospital. Daniel has appendicitis.

Appendicitis is inflammation of the appendix and is the most common disease that requires emergency surgery. It can occur at any age but has a peak incidence in late teens and early 20s. About 250,000 cases of appendicitis are reported every year.5

**Causes**
Appendicitis is due to obstruction of the appendiceal lumen (inside of the appendix) that is caused by viral infection, stricture, fecal mass or ingestion of barium.5,9

**Signs and symptoms**
Typical signs and symptoms include:5,9

- Abdominal pain that can be localized to the right lower quadrant or generalized over the abdomen. Rebound tenderness is common. Rebound tenderness is elicited when the nurse or physician removes pressure from the abdomen rather than when pressure is applied (as in palpation). In other words, the nurse applies pressure during palpation, and when that pressure is released and pain occurs, rebound tenderness is present.
- Anorexia.
- Nausea or vomiting.
- Low-grade fever.
- Elevated white blood cell count with an increased number of immature cells.

CT scan or abdominal sonography may be used to visualize the appendix. Diagnosis is based on patient history and diagnostic test results.

**Nursing alert!** Abrupt termination of abdominal pain suggests perforation or infarction of the appendix.5

**Treatment**
The only treatment for appendicitis is removal of the appendix or appendectomy. Laparoscopic appendectomies reduce recovery time and enhance the speed of recovery.

**Nursing alert!** An ice bag may be used for pain relief prior to surgery. NEVER apply heat to the right lower abdominal quadrant because heat may cause rupture of the appendix. Never give enemas or laxatives because these may also rupture the appendix5

**Peritonitis**
Peritonitis is an inflammation of the peritoneum (the membrane that lines the abdominal cavity and covers the internal abdominal organs). Peritonitis can be acute or chronic and is associated with a 10 percent mortality rate.5

**Causes**
Under normal conditions, the peritoneum is sterile. Peritonitis occurs when bacteria enter the peritoneum as a result of appendicitis, diverticulitis, peptic ulcer, ulcerative colitis, abdominal cancers, strangulated obstruction or stab wounds.5

Chemical inflammation may also cause peritonitis. Chemical inflammation occurs with events such as perforation of a gastric ulcer or rupture of a fallopian tube. At times, it may be associated with peritoneal dialysis.5

**Signs and symptoms**
Signs and symptoms of peritonitis include:5,9

- Abrupt, severe and widespread abdominal pain. This pain generally intensifies and localizes in the area of the case (e.g., right lower quadrant with appendicitis) with accompanying rebound tenderness.
- Excessive diaphoresis.
- Weakness.
- Pallor.
- Cold skin.
- Hypotension.

Elite Page 8
Tachycardia.
Fever of 103 degrees F or higher.
Distention of the abdomen.
Decreased intestinal motility.
With accompanying intestinal obstruction, there will be nausea, vomiting and rigidity of the abdomen.

**Diagnosis**
In addition to patient history, the following are used to identify peritonitis:

- **Abdominal x-rays:** Reveals distension of the small and large intestine due to gas and edema; if internal organs are perforated, air may be seen underneath the diaphragm.
- **Chest x-ray:** May reveal elevated diaphragm.
- **Blood studies:** Reveal leukocytosis.
- **Paracentesis:** Shows the presence of bacteria, blood, pus or urine.
- **Laparotomy:** Used to determine the underlying cause of the peritonitis.

**Treatment**
Prevention of the disorder is obviously desirable. Gastrointestinal inflammatory conditions should be carefully monitored and treatment initiated promptly. Preoperative and postoperative antibiotic therapy (as appropriate) can help to prevent the development of peritonitis. However, if peritonitis arises, it is a medical emergency requiring immediate treatment. Antibiotic therapy, dependent upon the organisms causing the infection, is initiated. Patients are not to receive food or drink orally. Fluids and electrolytes are administered intravenously. Supportive measures include administration of analgesics, insertion of a nasogastric (NG) tube for bowel decompression, and if needed, a rectal tube to promote the passage of flatus. If peritonitis is due to a perforation (e.g., a perforated fallopian tube) surgery must be performed as soon as possible. The goals of surgery are to remove the contents spilled into the peritoneum from the perforation and to insert drains to facilitate this removal.

**Pepitic ulcers**
Angela is a 55-year-old breast cancer survivor. She is self-employed as a management consultant. Her job is quite stressful, and she smokes about a pack of cigarettes a day. For the past several months Angela has been experiencing heartburn and indigestion, particularly after meals. She also notices that the discomfort intensifies after drinking orange juice or coffee. She attributes these symptoms to job stress and is self-medicating with antacids. However, because of her previous diagnosis of cancer, she becomes concerned and decides to seek medical help. Her physician orders an upper GI and small bowel series. She suspects that Angela may have a pepitic ulcer.

**Definition and incidence**
Pepitic ulcer disease (PUD) is defined as an erosion of the GI mucosa. Pepitic ulcers are circumscribed lesions that can develop in the lower esophagus, stomach, pylorus (area of the stomach that “connects” to the small intestine), the duodenum (the first portion of the small intestine that connects to the stomach), or the jejunum (the portion of the small intestine that’s located between the duodenum and the ileum), the lowest portion of the small intestine that connects to the large intestine. Approximately 80 percent of all pepitic ulcers are located in the duodenum.

Pepitic ulcers can have serious, even fatal, consequences. In the United States, an estimated 14.5 million people have been diagnosed as having PUD, with about 1.6 million people developing the disease every year. This disease kills an estimated 4,000 and disables about 328,000 annually.

Gastric ulcers develop most often in middle-aged and elderly men, particularly those who are chronic users of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), alcohol or tobacco.

**Pathophysiology**
Under normal circumstances, a thick layer of mucus protects the stomach from chemical trauma, mechanical trauma and autodigestion. This mucus acts as a barrier that prevents harmful effects of gastric acid and digestive enzymes. Prostaglandins also provide a measure of gastric protection. When the gastric mucosal barrier is damaged or destroyed, gastric ulcers can develop.

The duodenum is protected by a mucoid alkaline secretion of the Brunner’s glands. This secretion neutralizes the acid chyme. When there is an excessive production of acid that cannot be neutralized, duodenal ulcers can develop.

**Causes**
There are three main causes of PUD:

1. **Infection with Helicobacter pylori (H. pylori):** These bacteria are present in the gastric mucosa of about 20 percent of Americans under the age of 40 and in about 50 percent of Americans over 60 years of age. Since most people with H. pylori do not develop gastric ulcers, additional (at this time unknown) factors must influence their development. In susceptible persons, the bacteria contribute to the breakdown of the gastric mucosal barrier and facilitate ulcer development.

2. **The use of NSAIDs:** These drugs facilitate the formation of ulcers by interfering with the secretion of prostaglandins, which provide some measure of protection of the gastric lining.

3. **Effects of certain illnesses:** Certain illnesses are associated with the development of PUD. These include pancreatitis, hepatic disease, Crohn’s disease, pre-existing gastritis and Zollinger-Ellison syndrome (increased gastrin production from non-beta islet cell tumors of the pancreas).

There are also a number of predisposing factors for PUD:

- Blood type is associated with specific types of ulcers. Gastric ulcers tend to develop in persons with type A blood, while duodenal ulcers tend to develop in persons with type O blood.
- Physical trauma, emotional stress and the normal processes of aging are also contributory factors.
- Irritants such as alcohol, coffee and tobacco may increase the risk of ulcer development by accelerating gastric acid emptying that facilitates mucosal barrier breakdown.

**Signs and symptoms**
A gastric ulcer attack usually begins with heartburn and indigestion. Eating may both cause and relieve pain. For example, eating causes the gastric wall to expand and may cause pain as the affected area stretches. If eating causes pain, there may be weight loss. In severe cases, there may be significant GI bleeding.

Duodenal ulcers also cause heartburn and localized mid-epigastric pain. Eating relieves this pain. Weight gain is likely because patients eat to diminish the pain. An unusual sensation of hot water bubbling in the back of the throat is characteristic of duodenal ulcers.

Duodenal ulcer attacks usually take place about two hours after meals or whenever the stomach is empty. Attacks may also occur after ingesting orange juice, aspirin or alcohol. Such attacks occur several times a year, then diminish into remission.

**Complications**

**Nursing alert!** Ulcers can penetrate the pancreas and cause serious back pain. Perforation of the ulcer may occur, causing abrupt, severe pain, a rigid abdomen, grunting respirations and diminished bowel sounds. Patients should seek immediate medical help if these symptoms develop.

Ulcers may cause significant bleeding that can lead to hypovolemic shock. Bloody vomitus or stools, low hemoglobin and hematocrit levels, tachycardia and hypotension may signal this serious complication. Patients need emergency medical intervention for severe hemorrhage.

Gastric dumping syndrome is also a potential complication of PUD. Dumping syndrome is characterized by abdominal distension, nausea and vomiting. If an ulcer is close to the pylorus, the mucosa can become inflamed and edematous, eventually blocking passage into the small intestine. This causes stomach distension. As secretions build up in the stomach there is bloating, indigestion, nausea, vomiting, feelings of fullness and abdominal pain. Dumping syndrome is managed by inserting an NG tube to withdraw accumulated gastric secretions and decompress the stomach. As measures are taken to heal the ulcer that causes dumping syndrome, the blockage is decreased or eliminated and normal passage from the stomach to the small intestine is restored.

**Diagnosis**
Diagnosis is made by taking a careful patient history and evaluating the findings of certain diagnostic tests.
The disease often causes feelings of a constant need to pass stools (even though the bowel may be empty), accompanied by cramping, pain and straining. These feelings are referred to as tenesmus.8

Additional symptoms include:5,9
- Sensations of urgency to pass stools.
- Weight loss related to malabsorption.
- Weakness related to possible anemia and malabsorption.
- Anorexia.
- Nausea.
- Vomiting.

Complications
There are a number of complications associated with ulcerative colitis. These include:5,9
- Hemorrhage.
- Infection.
- Anal fissure or fistula.
- Perirectal abscesses.
- Toxic megacolon.
- Coagulation deficit.

Another complication is fulminant colitis. This problem occurs when the lesions associated with ulcerative colitis penetrate the muscle of the bowel. The patient experiences abrupt, violent diarrhea accompanied by rebound tenderness, abdominal pain and toxemia. Fulminant colitis may also trigger toxic megacolon (toxic dilation of the colon) or perforation of the bowel.8

Nursing alert! A diagnosis of ulcerative colitis increases the risk for future development of colorectal cancer.5

Diagnosis
A number of diagnostic tests are used to diagnose ulcerative colitis. These include:
- Sigmoidoscopy: Because ulcerative colitis generally develops in the rectum first, sigmoidoscopy may be the first diagnostic procedure performed. Ulcerative colitis shows mucosal friability (inflammation), decreased mucosal detail, mucosal flattening, evidence of pinpoint hemorrhages and thick inflammatory exudates. Biopsy can help to confirm the diagnosis.5,9
- Lab studies: Ulcerative colitis may cause decreased serum potassium, magnesium and albumin levels; decreased white blood cell count; decreased hemoglobin level; and a prolonged prothrombin time.5,9
- Stool specimens: The specimen should be evaluated for the presence of bacteria, parasites and ova. In the case of ulcerative colitis, blood and pus are present but not disease-causing organisms.5,9
- Colonoscopy: Colonoscopy is performed to determine the extent of the disease process and to assess strictures and polyps, if present. Biopsy of suspicious areas is performed.5,9
- Barium enema: May also be performed to determine the extent of the disease and the presence of complicating factors, such as malignancy.5

Nursing alert! Barium enemas and endoscopies are contraindicated if the patient has active signs...
and symptoms or indications of complications because these can cause bowel perforation.\textsuperscript{5,6}

**Treatment**

The primary treatment goals are to control inflammation, reduce signs and symptoms, replace blood loss, replace loss of fluids, electrolytes and other nutrients, and to prevent the development of complications.\textsuperscript{5}

Supportive measures are initiated in an effort to control the disease and avoid surgery.

Sulfasalazine (Azulfidine) is the drug of choice and is administered for its anti-inflammatory and anti-microbial action. Other drugs with these properties include olsalazine, mesalamine and balsalazide. Steroids such as prednisone and hydrocortisone are given to control inflammation, and immunomodulators or s-aminosalicylates may be administered to decrease the frequency of exacerbations. Iron supplements may be used to correct anemia.\textsuperscript{5,6}

**Nursing alert!** The use of antispasmodics and anti-diarrheal agents may cause toxic megacolon (dangerous dilation of the colon) and are usually contraindicated. Such drugs are used only in those patients with controlled ulcerative colitis but who have frequent, loose stools.\textsuperscript{5,6}

Bedrest, IV fluid replacements and a clear-liquid diet are indicated during acute attacks. Dehydrated, dehydrated patients may be given total parenteral nutrition and receive nothing by mouth to rest the intestinal tract, decrease diarrhea and restore fluid and electrolyte balance. Blood transfusions may be necessary for patients who experience significant blood loss.\textsuperscript{5,6}

For patients who do not respond to medications and supportive measures, surgery may be necessary. It is estimated that about 25 percent to 35 percent of patients need some type of surgery.\textsuperscript{4}

There are several surgical options.

- **Proctocolectomy with ileostomy:** The colon, rectum and anus are removed and the end of the small intestine (ileum) is brought through a stoma in the abdominal wall to allow the drainage of intestinal waste products from the body. An external bag is worn over the stoma, which is usually located in the right lower abdomen just below the belt line to the right of the naval.\textsuperscript{26}

- **Restorative proctocolectomy (ileoanal pouch anal anastomosis or IPAA):** Developed about 20 years ago, this procedure eliminates the need for an ostomy bag. The procedure is performed in two parts. The first operation involves removal of the colon and rectum. The anus and anal sphincter muscles are left intact. The ileum is made into a pouch and connected to the anus. A temporary ileostomy is performed to allow the pouch to heal. In about 10 to 12 weeks (after the pouch has healed), the temporary ileostomy is closed and stool passes through the anus. There are several possible complications that can occur after an IPAA is performed. These include pouchitis (inflammation of the pouch), bowel obstruction and pouch failure, which necessitates removal of the pouch and performing a permanent ileostomy.\textsuperscript{26}

- **Kock pouch or continent ileostomy:** Usually performed prior to the development of the IPAA. It is not considered a good primary operation. A pouch is formed from a small loop of the terminal ileum and a valve from the distal ileum. This results in a stoma located just above the pubic hairline. The pouch is emptied periodically via a catheter that is inserted in the stoma.\textsuperscript{26}

**Special nursing considerations**

- **Monitor intake and output meticulously.** Remain alert to signs of fluid and electrolyte imbalance.\textsuperscript{5,6}
- **Monitor lab studies for evidence of electrolyte imbalance and decreased hemoglobin and hematocrit levels.**\textsuperscript{5,6}
- **Provide good skin care and care of the ostomy if necessary.** Patients need explanations about its care and good emotional support.\textsuperscript{5,6}
- **Explain the importance of regular medical follow-up.**\textsuperscript{5,6}

**Crohn’s disease**

Crohn’s disease (also referred to as regional enteritis and granulomatous colitis) is also an IBD. But unlike ulcerative colitis, which is confined to the colon, Crohn’s disease is an inflammation of any portion of the GI tract that usually extends through all layers of the wall of the intestine.\textsuperscript{5,6}

The inflammation associated with Crohn’s disease has a slow, steady progression. Lymph nodes enlarge and hinder lymph flow in the submucosa. Obstruction of lymph flow causes edema, ulceration of the mucosa and the development of tissues and abscesses, sometimes referred to as granulomas.

**Nursing alert!** The pattern of ulcerations in Crohn’s disease is not continuous (referred to as skipping), compared to the continuous pattern of ulcer lesions found in ulcerative colitis. This is a characteristic that helps to differentiate the two types of IBD.\textsuperscript{5,6}

The lining of the small intestine develops oval shaped elevated patches of lymph follicles called Peyer’s patches. The wall of the bowel thickens, and there is narrowing of the affected areas of the intestine. This narrowing causes intestinal obstruction of varying degrees of seriousness. Loops of the bowel that are inflamed attach to other loops, both diseased and normal. The diseased segments of the bowel become thicker, shorter and narrower.\textsuperscript{8}

**Incidence**

The number of cases of Crohn’s disease has steadily increased over the past 50 years, now affecting seven out of every 100,000 people. It is most common among adults between the ages of 20 to 40. It is less common in blacks and two to three times more common in persons of Jewish ancestry.\textsuperscript{5,8}

**Cause**

The exact cause of Crohn’s disease is not known. However, a genetic link is suspected.

For instance, the disease is sometimes found in identical twins, and 10 percent to 20 percent of patients with the disease have relatives who have been diagnosed with Crohn’s disease. Recent research findings show a mutation in the gene NOD2. The gene is found twice as often in persons with the disease as compared to the population in general. This gene is believed to change the body’s ability to fight bacterial infection. As of this writing, there is no realistic screening method to check for this mutation.\textsuperscript{8}

**Signs and symptoms**

Early symptoms of Crohn’s disease may be mistaken for bowel obstruction or appendicitis.\textsuperscript{8} Symptoms include a steady, colic-like pain in the right lower abdomen, cramping and tenderness. Signs include weight loss, diarrhea, bloody stools, steatorrhea (the presence of excessive amounts of fat in stools), and the presence of a palpable mass in the right lower abdominal quadrant.\textsuperscript{8}

**Complications**

Complications associated with Crohn’s disease include: \textsuperscript{5,8,9}

- **Intestinal obstruction.**
- **Nutritional deficiency.**
- **Fistula of the anus.**
- **Perineal abscess.**
- **A variety of fistulas, including to the bladder, vagina or skin in the area of an old scar.**
- **Fluid imbalance.**
- **Peritonitis.**

**Diagnosis**

Diagnosis depends on the patient’s history, physical examination and the findings from various diagnostic studies.

- **Barium enema:** This test shows what is called a “string sign” if Crohn’s disease is present. This sign is caused by segments of strictures separated by portions of normal bowel. The narrowing of the bowel (or strictures) causes the string-like appearance.\textsuperscript{5}
- **Stool analysis:** A fecal occult blood test shows small amounts of blood in the stools.\textsuperscript{9}
- **Small bowel x-rays:** X-rays show ulceration, stiffening and irregular intestinal mucosa.\textsuperscript{9}
- **Blood studies:** An elevated white blood cell count is present, red blood cell analysis may indicate anemia, and there may be decreased levels of potassium, calcium, and magnesium.\textsuperscript{8,9}
- **Sigmoidoscopy and colonoscopy:** These studies may show patchy (discontinuous) areas of inflammation that help to distinguish it from ulcerative colitis, which causes continuous areas of inflammation.\textsuperscript{9}
Treatmen

Treatmen focuses on controlling the inflammatory process of the disease and reducing signs and symtoms. Supportive measures including medications, dietary changes, rest and stress reduction are the first steps taken. Surgery is never a first initiative because it does not provide a cure, and recurrence of symptoms after surgery is common.3,4,6

Initial measures include:

- Administration of medications such as sulfasalazine to reduce inflammation.9
- Administration of immunosuppressants to reduce the response to antigens.9
- Administration of infliximab, an anti-tumor necrosis factor agent for disease that does not respond to conventional therapy.3,9
- Administration of anti-diarrheal drugs to suppress diarrhea. Note that such drugs are contraindicated if bowel obstruction is present.9
- Administration of an opioid analgesic for the control of both pain and diarrhea.5,9
- Reduction of stress. Patients may need education regarding stress reduction measures.9
- Encouragement of adequate rest to facilitate bowel healing.9
- Implementation of dietary changes: Foods that are to be eliminated vary from patient to patient. However, foods that are commonly found to be irritating and thus need to be removed from the diet include dairy products, spicy foods, fatty foods, caffeine, and carbonated beverages.9

Surgery

Medications and supportive measures are the first interventions for patients dealing with Crohn’s disease. Nevertheless, approximately 66 percent to 75 percent of patients with Crohn’s disease eventually require surgical intervention.27 Surgery is indicated to correct bowel perforation, in the event of massive hemorrhage, fistulas, acute intestinal obstruction, toxic megacolon, or for the event of massive hemorrhage, fistulas, acute intestinal obstruction, toxic megacolon, or for patients who do not respond to medication and supportive measures.5,27

There are several surgical options for the patient with Crohn’s disease.

- Strictureplasty: When the small intestine is the area affected by Crohn’s disease, portions of diseased intestine alternate with portions of normal bowel. The affected areas narrow, forming strictures, which may interfere with the passage of digested food. Pain occurs when normal segments of the intestine “push” against the affected areas in an effort to promote passage of digested food. During strictureplasty, the surgeon makes a lengthwise incision along the affected area(s) and then sutures the incision crosswise. This widens the stricture without removing any part of the small intestine.27
- Resection: In the event of a particularly long stricture or if there are many strictures close to each other, the surgeon may need to remove the affected area of the intestine.

Resection

The two “ends” of the normal or unaffected intestine are joined together (anastomosis). A resection may provide many years of relief from the symptoms of the disease. Unfortunately, the disease can recur at or close to the site of the anastomosis.27

- Colectomy (removal of the colon) or both colon and rectum (proctocolectomy): Patients with severe disease that affects the colon may need to have the entire colon removed. If the rectum is unaffected, the surgeon may be able to join the end of the small intestine to the rectum, thus allowing for passage of stool through the rectum. However, if the rectum is affected, and both colon and rectum are removed, the patient requires an ileostomy and must wear an external bag for the collection of body waste.27

Nursing alert! Even if the diseased section of the intestine is surgically removed, the inflammation can reoccur in a previously unaffected segment of the intestine.27 About half of adults who undergo a resection have a recurrence of Crohn’s disease within five years of surgery.27

Special nursing considerations

- Patients need emotional support as they deal with the effects of Crohn’s disease and its chronic nature.5,9
- Intake and output should be meticulously monitored.5,9
- Monitor for fluid and electrolyte imbalance.5,9
- Monitor hemoglobin and hematocrit levels.5,9
- Promote rest and avoidance of foods that trigger attacks.5,9
- For patients requiring a resection, arrange for a visit by an enterostomal therapist.5

Colorectal cancer

Colorectal cancer is the third most common cancer in the United States as well as in Europe.3,5 Nearly all colorectal malignancies are adenocarcinomas.5

Colorectal cancer generally grows slowly and often remains localized for a long period of time. Early diagnosis before involvement of the lymph nodes has about a 90 percent cure rate. The five-year survival rate for persons with adjacent organ or lymph node spread is about 60 percent.1

Colorectal cancer includes cancers that affect both the colon and the rectum. Colon cancer refers to malignancies that occur below the small intestine and above the last six inches of the GI tract. Rectal cancer refers to malignancies that occur in the last six inches of the GI tract.3

Incidence

More than 130,000 people are diagnosed with colorectal cancer every year in the United States. It causes more than 50,000 deaths annually and is the second-leading cause of cancer death in the United States.5

Cause and risk factors

The exact etiology of colorectal cancer is not known. However, research shows that there is a higher incidence of the disease in areas of higher economic development, which may indicate a relationship to a diet high in saturated animal fat such as found in red meats and processed meats (e.g., hot dogs and processed luncheon meats).3,5

Additional risk factors include:3,5
- Cigarette smoking.
- Obesity.
- Sedentary lifestyle.
- Adult-onset diabetes.
- Age (older than 40).
- History of ulcerative colitis.

Nursing alert! The average period of time between diagnosis of ulcerative colitis and the development of colorectal cancer is 11 to 17 years.5

Research indicates that the development of colorectal cancer is linked to alterations in several genes. The majority of colon cancers stem from adenomatous polyps. However, other polyps may become malignant, and it is impossible to say which polyps will become cancerous. Complete removal of all colon polyps dramatically decreases the risk of a polyp causing malignancy.3

Signs and symptoms

Signs and symptoms of colorectal cancer depend on the location and stage of the malignancy. Although disease in its early stages may not cause any signs or symptoms, the following are associated with the disease as it advances.

- The right (ascending) colon: Black, tarry stools, anemia due to insidious blood loss (which may be the first sign of colon cancer), abdominal cramps or pressure, vomiting, weakness, fatigue, anorexia and weight loss.9 Stool in the right or ascending colon is liquid, so tumors in this area can actually become very large before blocking stool movement.3
- Transverse colon: Tumors in this area can interfere with the movement of more solid stool and can cause cramps and constipation that last for more than several days.3
- The left (descending) colon: Intestinal obstruction, abdominal distention, pain, vomiting, cramps, rectal pressure, constipation, diarrhea, dark red or bright red blood in stools, and pencil-shaped or ribbon-shaped stools.9
- Sigmoid colon: Passage of bright red blood via the rectum, changes in bowel habits and ribbon-like stools.3

Signs and symptoms of rectal cancer include:28
- Diarrhea.
- Constipation.
- Narrow stools (“ribbon” shaped) or a change in the shape of stools.
- Feeling that the bowel isn’t emptying even after bowel movements.
- Dark or bright red blood in the stool.
- Abdominal cramps, bloating, gas pains.
- Changes in appetite.
- Weight loss.
- Fatigue.

Diagnosis

In addition to a history and physical, a number of diagnostic tests are conducted to identify colorectal cancer.
Digital rectal exam (DRE): DRE is conducted to palpate for any rectal masses. DRE detects nearly 15 percent of colorectal cancers.5,9

Fecal occult blood test: This test is conducted to look for the presence of blood in stools.5,9

Scopes: Proctoscopy, sigmoidoscopy and colonoscopy are performed to visualize tumors, detect polyps, remove polyps and biopsy suspicious tissues and lesions.5,9

CT scans: CT scans are generally conducted to identify areas of metastasis.5,9

Barium x-rays: These x-rays can show the location of lesions that cannot be detected visually or manually.5,9

Carcinoembryonic antigen: This is a blood study used as a tumor marker. It is not specific enough for early diagnosis, but is used to monitor patients before and after treatment.1

Treatment
Surgery is the most effective treatment for colorectal cancer. In very early cases, polyp removal and analysis of adjacent tissues to determine whether the disease is localized may be sufficient. Lymph nodes may also be removed to determine whether the cancer has invaded the lymphatic system.5

Depending on the extent of the disease, colon resection (removal of parts of the colon) may be necessary. In some cases, a permanent stoma with an external collection device may be necessary. Metastatic disease or inoperable tumors indicate the need for chemotherapy, such as fluorouracil with leucovorin, irinotecan and oxaliplatin. Monoclonal antibody therapy may be initiated to inhibit the growth of cancer cells. Radiation therapy may be used before or after surgery or in combination with chemotherapy.5

Anal cancer
Anal cancer is a rather rare cancer that affects the anal canal. About 5,290 new cases of anal cancer were expected to be diagnosed in 2009 in the United States, 3,190 in women and 2,100 in men. It is estimated that 710 people will have died from anal cancer in 2009.29

Anal cancer is not colorectal cancer. Unfortunately, many people, including health care professionals, equate anal cancer with colorectal cancer. The rectum is the lowest portion of the colon. The anal canal houses the sphincter that controls the passage of stool from the body.29

Anal cancer is closely linked to human papillomavirus (HPV) infection, a sexually transmitted disease. It is believed that HPV is associated with 90 percent to 99 percent of all anal cancers. The infection is most often diagnosed in white females.29

Risk factors
A number of factors are linked to an increased risk of anal cancer.29,30

HPV infection: HPV infection increases the risk of a number of cancers, including anal and cervical cancer. HPV can also cause genital warts.

Older age: The majority of reported cases of anal cancer are diagnosed in persons 50 years of age and older.

Multiple sexual partners: Risk of anal cancer is greater in men and women who have multiple sexual partners throughout their lifetimes.

Anal sex: The risk of anal cancer is greater in persons who engage in anal sex.

Smoking: Smoking cigarettes may increase the risk of anal cancer.

Immunosuppressant drugs: Persons who take drugs that weaken the immune system, such as persons who have received organ transplants, may have an increased risk of anal cancer.

Corticosteroids: Long-term use of corticosteroids may also increase the risk of anal cancer.

HIV infection: HIV infection suppresses the immune system and increases the risk of anal cancer.

Signs and symptoms
Signs and symptoms are not specific to anal cancer and may mimic other problems. Signs and symptoms associated with anal cancer include:30

- Pain in the anal area.
- Bleeding from the anus or rectum.
- A mass in the anal canal.
- Anal itching.

Nursing alert! Some patients may assume that these symptoms are not serious and think that they may be caused by common problems such as hemorrhoids. Therefore, they don’t seek medical help. Encourage patients to always seek medical intervention for their symptoms.30

Diagnosis
Diagnosis is made depending on the findings of a history and physical exam and diagnostic tests. A digital rectal exam (DRE) is performed, and an anoscope may be inserted to inspect the anal canal. Ultrasound may also be conducted, and a biopsy of suspicious tissue or masses is performed.30

Treatment
Anal cancer is generally treated using a combination of chemotherapy and radiation. Surgery may be performed as well. Very small, localized anal cancers may be removed along with surrounding tissue to determine the size and spread of the disease. Advanced cancers or cancers that do not respond to chemotherapy and radiation may require more extensive surgery. In these cases, the surgeon may remove the anal canal, rectum and part of the colon. The remaining colon is attached to an abdominal stoma and an external colostomy bag.30

Anal cancer is a relatively uncommon cancer. Patients need to be assessed and treated by health care professionals who have experience in diagnosing and treating this cancer.

Celiac disease
Celiac disease, also referred to as idiopathic steatorrhea, nontropical sprue, gluten enteropathy and celiac sprue, is a disease that damages the small intestine. It is characterized by an inability to properly absorb food and an intolerance of gluten, a protein found in wheat, wheat products, rye and barley. Gluten is found in a wide variety of foods but may also be found in everyday items such as vitamins, lip balms and some medicines.5,31

Celiac disease is two-fold disease. It is a disease of malabsorption and an immune reaction to gluten.31 When gluten is ingested, there is injury to the villi in the upper portion of the small intestine. This leads to a reduction in surface area and malabsorption of most nutrients.9

Under normal conditions, villi allow absorption of nutrients from food into the bloodstream. If villi are not healthy, nutrients cannot be absorbed. This causes the patient to become malnourished, no matter how much food is eaten.31

Causes and incidence
Celiac disease is caused by an intramucosal enzyme defect that prevents the body from digesting gluten. Tissue toxicity occurs, resulting in swift turnover of cells, increased number of epithelial lymphocytes and damage to the surface epithelium of the small bowel.5,31

Celiac disease is found in people all over the world. More than 2 million persons in the United States have celiac disease, which affects one of every 133 people in this country.5,31

Celiac disease affects women and girls twice as often as men and boys. There is a strong genetic association among persons who have the disease. For people who have a first-degree relative (e.g., parent, sibling, or child) with celiac disease, the incidence may be as high as one in 22 people.31

The disease is found primarily in whites and persons of European ancestry. It is also more common in people with other genetic disorders, such as Down syndrome.31

Celiac disease, which may also be autoimmune in nature, seems to occur in people who have other autoimmune diseases such as:31

- Type 1 diabetes mellitus.
- Thyroid disease.
- Addison’s disease.
- Rheumatoid arthritis.

Other conditions associated with celiac disease include anemia, lactose intolerance and osteoporosis.5

Complications of celiac disease include:5

- Anemia secondary to malabsorption.
- Syncope, angina and heart failure due to anemia.
- Bleeding disorders due to vitamin K deficiency.
- Intestinal lymphoma.

Signs and symptoms
There are a wide variety of signs and symptoms associated with celiac disease. The disease affects people in different ways because of the amount of damage to the small intestine, a person’s age and the length of time the patient has had symptoms without being diagnosed and treated.31
GI effects: Damage to the small intestine may cause cramping, recurrent diarrhea, abdominal distention, weakness and an increase in appetite without weight gain.9

Hematologic effects: Anemia due to malabsorption of folate, iron, and vitamin B12.5

Malabsorption effects: Loss of calories, fat-soluble vitamins (A,D,K), calcium, minerals, electrolytes and malabsorption of fat, carbohydrates and protein.5,9

Musculoskeletal effects: Osteomalacia, osteoporosis, tetany and bone pain due to calcium loss and vitamin D deficiency.4

Neurologic effects: Paresthesia, seizures, peripheral neuropathy.5,9

Skin effects: Dry skin, eczema, psoriasis, dermatitis, brittle nails.5,6

Endocrine effects: Amenorrhea, hypometabolism and adrenocortical insufficiency.5,9

Psychosocial effects: Irritability, lethargy, and mood changes.5,9

Diagnosis
A number of diagnostic findings lead to the diagnosis of celiac disease.

Esophagogastroduodenoscopy: During this test, tissue specimens are obtained for biopsy. Histologic changes seen include a mosaic-like pattern of alternating flat and bumpy areas, a nearly total absence of villi, and an irregular, blunt, unorganized network of blood vessels confirm diagnosis.5

Blood studies: Elevated alkaline phosphatase levels, low cholesterol and albumin levels, slightly elevated liver enzymes, abnormal blood clotting and anemia.5

Antibody blood tests: High levels of anti-tissue transglutaminase (+TGA) antibody or anti-endomysium antibodies (EMA) are indicative of the disease.31

Treatment
The only treatment for celiac disease is implementation of a gluten-free diet for the remainder of the patient’s life. This involves eliminating wheat, barley, rye and oats from the diet as well as foods that are made from or contain these products. Patients usually notice signs and symptom improvement within days of eliminating gluten from their diets. The small intestine heals within three to six months in children but may take several years in adults.5,31

Nursing alert! Because this is a significant dietary change, patients need dietary consultation and excellent patient education. Initially, the diet consists of proteins and is slowly expanded to include other foods.5

Here are some tips for patients as they adapt to their new way of eating, which must continue for the rest of their lives!

- Read all food labels carefully! Many foods contain gluten in varying amounts.5
- Ask pharmacists whether prescribed medications contain wheat or other gluten products.31
- Some non-food products, such as lipstick, may contain gluten as an additive. Find out about the contents of any product that can be ingested through the GI tract! If ingredients are not provided on the label or package insert, contact the manufacturer for a product list.31
- When eating out, ask the waiter if a gluten-free menu is available.31

Here are some Web sites that persons dealing with celiac disease may find useful.

- American Celiac Disease Alliance (www.americanceliac.org).
- American Dietetic Association (www.eatright.org).
- Celiac Disease Foundation (www.celiac.org).
- Gluten Intolerance Group of North America (www.gluten.net).

Diverticular disease
Bradley is a 70-year-old retired nurse. He is active and healthy, and since his retirement, enjoys traveling throughout the United States. On a recent visit to his son in Arizona, he suddenly developed left lower abdominal quadrant pain and bloody diarrhea. Bradley’s son insists on taking him to the emergency room for evaluation. The cause of Bradley’s rectal hemorrhage is determined to be due to diverticulitis.

Diverticular disease is characterized by bulging pouches or diverticula in the GI tract. These pouches push the mucosal lining through the surrounding muscle. Diverticula are most often found in the sigmoid colon, but can develop anywhere from the proximal end of the pharynx to the anus.5,9

When the pouches become inflamed, it is referred to as diverticulitis. Diverticulitis may cause potentially fatal complications, such as obstruction, infection or hemorrhage. In diverticulitis, diverticular exist, but do not cause any symptoms.5,32 Together, diverticulosis and diverticulitis are referred to as diverticular disease.32 It is estimated that 10 percent to 25 percent of people with diverticulosis get diverticulitis.32

Meckel’s diverticulum is diverticular disease of the ileum and is the most common congenital anomaly of the GI tract. It is characterized by a “blind tube,” similar to the appendix, that opens into the ileum. It is found in about 2 percent of the population, usually in males. Meckel’s diverticulum, if uncomplicated, is asymptomatic. If complications occur, the patient experiences abdominal pain, usually around the umbilicus, and dark red melena. Complications may lead to peptic ulcer, perforation, peritonitis and bowel obstruction.5

Cause and incidence
Diverticula are most likely due to high pressure exerted on a portion of the GI wall where blood vessels enter. Diet is believed to contribute to the development of diverticulosis because inadequate fiber diminishes fecal residue, narrows the lumen of the bowel and exerts high intra-abdominal pressure during elimination of feces.9

When diverticulosis occurs, undigested food and bacteria build up in the diverticular sac. The food and bacteria become a hard mass that inhibits blood supply to the walls of the sac. This lack of blood makes the sac susceptible to bacterial infection and inflammation. This may lead to perforation, obstruction, peritonitis or hemorrhage. Sometimes the inflamed portion of the colon may adhere to organs such as the bladder, causing a fistula to form.5,9

Diverticolitis is most prevalent in developed or industrialized countries, especially the United States, England and Australia where low-fiber diets are common. Areas where people consume diets high in fiber, such as Asia and Africa, have a rare incidence of the disease.5,9,32

High-fiber diets make stools soft and easy to eliminate from the body. Lack of fiber decreases stool bulk and makes stools harder and more difficult to pass from the body. If stools are hard, people strain when eliminating stool during a bowel movement. Straining increases colonic pressure, which may cause the lining of the colon to bulge out through weak areas in the wall of the colon.32

Diverticular disease is most common in men more than 40 years of age and in persons who lack fiber in their diet. Incidence increases with age. However, about 20 percent of patients are younger than 50. About half of older adults develop diverticulosis.5

Complications
There are several potentially lethal complications of diverticular disease that stem from diverticulitis.

Rectal hemorrhage: Rectal hemorrhage due to diverticulitis is relatively uncommon. However, when it does occur, it can cause massive blood loss. It is believed that such bleeding is the result of blood vessel(s) in a diverticulum that weaken and burst. Bleeding can range from minimal to severe, but it may stop by itself without medical intervention. However, some persons experience severe hemorrhage requiring swift medical intervention, blood transfusion and colonoscopy to identify the site and cause of bleeding.5,32

Nursing alert! All rectal bleeding, even small amounts, must be medically evaluated as soon as possible. The cause may be self-limiting and minor in nature, or quite serious. Encourage all patients to seek prompt evaluation for rectal bleeding!

Fistula: A fistula, or abnormal opening or connection of tissues between two organs or between organ and the skin, can be a complication of diverticulitis. In the case of infection related to diverticulitis, the infection may travel outside of the colon, causing the tissue of the colon to adhere to nearby tissues. This most often involves tissue of the bladder, small intestine and the...
skin, with a fistula between the colon and the bladder being the most common. Such a fistula is found in men more frequently than women and can lead to severe urinary tract infections. Surgery may be necessary to remove the fistula and the part of the colon that is affected.32

- **Intestinal obstruction**: Infection may cause significant scarring that may lead to intestinal obstruction. Complete obstruction is a medical emergency requiring immediate surgical intervention.32
- **Abscess**: Abscess is a localized infection that can cause swelling and destruction of tissue. A small abscess may be confined to the colon wall and resolve itself with antibiotic treatment. Failure to respond to antibiotics may require an incision and drainage of the abscess.32
- **Perforations and peritonitis**: Infected perforations spread infection from the colon to the abdominal cavity causing peritonitis. Symptoms include severe nausea, vomiting, fever, and abdominal tenderness. Peritonitis is a medical emergency requiring surgery to treat the infection and remove the damaged portion of the colon.32

### Signs and symptoms
The patient with diverticulosis does not usually have any symptoms. This is generally true until, and if, the patient develops diverticulitis. In that case, symptoms may be listed according to severity of the problem.

- **Mild diverticulitis**: Left lower abdominal quadrant pain, mild nausea, gas, low-grade fever, leukocytosis and irregular bowel habits.5,32
- **Severe diverticulitis**: Diverticular rupture characterized by abdominal rigidity, left-lower abdominal quadrant pain, high fever, chills, hypotension and shock.4,9 About 20 percent of patients develop diverticular that rupture and cause abscesses or peritonitis.8 Minimal to severe rectal hemorrhage may occur from ruptured diverticula.32
- **Chronic diverticulitis**: Constipation, ribbon-shaped stools and intermittent diarrhea. Fibrosis and adhesions narrow the lumen of the bowel, which may cause intestinal obstruction. Such obstruction causes abdominal rigidity and pain, vomiting and reduced or absent bowel sounds.5,32

### Diagnosis
Diagnosis depends on a history and physical exam, including a rectal digital exam. Many times diverticular disease, which often produces no symptoms, is identified during an upper GI series performed as part of a differential diagnosis.5

An upper GI series can confirm (or rule out) diverticular disease of the esophagus and upper bowel. A barium enema can confirm (or rule out) diverticular disease of the lower bowel.1

**Nursing alert!** Biopsy of affected tissue can also rule out or confirm malignancy. However, biopsy should not be performed during acute phase of diverticular disease because bowel prep for colonoscopy is arduous and can put unnecessary pressure on the bowel.5

### Treatment
If diverticulosis does not produce signs or symptoms, treatment is not usually necessary. However, if signs and symptoms are present, treatment depends on their severity. The first step is to increase the amount of fiber in the diet. This may reduce or prevent symptoms and prevent complications such as diverticulitis.32

Fiber keeps stools soft and lowers the pressure within the colon, thus facilitating movement of feces through the bowel. High-fiber foods include whole-grain cereals and breads, fruits and vegetables. Fiber products (bulk-forming cathartics) such as methylcellulose (Citrucel) or psyllium (Metamucil) may be recommended by health care providers.32

Some physicians recommend that patients avoid nuts, popcorn and seed products such as sunflower, pumpkin and sesame seeds. These products may enter, block or aggravate diverticula.32

Patients with diverticulosis who experience pain, mild GI distress or constipation may be placed on a bland or liquid diet and stool softeners to help relieve symptoms and minimize the possibility of the development of diverticulitis. After symptoms diminish, high-fiber diets and fiber products may be recommended.5,9

Patients whose disease progresses to diverticulitis need to take additional measures. Persons experiencing mild diverticulitis without evidence of perforation need to rest their colons. A liquid diet and stool softeners are recommended. Antibiotics may be administered to prevent or control infection.5,32

If the diverticulitis is severe, a variety of interventions may be necessary, depending on the problems the diverticulitis is causing. The following interventions may be initiated, depending on the signs and symptoms present and the degree of severity of the disease.5,8,32

- Blood transfusions may be needed in the presence of severe hemorrhage.
- Analgesics are administered to control pain and relax smooth muscles.
- Antispasmodics are administered to manage muscle spasms.
- Surgery: Colon resection may be performed to remove affected segment of the colon.
- Surgery: Temporary colostomy may be performed to drain abscesses and remove infection and give the colon a rest. This procedure may be indicated in the event of obstruction, fistula, perforation or peritonitis.

### Special nursing considerations
Because diverticular disease is relatively common, especially as people age, nurses should encourage their patients to consume enough dietary fiber. Patients should also be taught to recognize early signs and symptoms of diverticular disease, even though the disease itself is often asymptomatic.

If patients are taking bulk-forming cathartics such as Metamucil, they should be taught to take them with plenty of water. If these agents are not taken with enough liquid, they may absorb moisture in the mouth and throat and swell, thus blocking the esophagus or trachea.5

Additional information about diverticular disease may be found on the following Web sites:

- American College of Gastroenterology (www.acg.gi.org).
- American Gastroenterological Association (www.gastro.org).

### Intussusception
Shannon is an experienced pediatric nurse who recently relocated from a large urban area to a small community in another state. After spending many years specializing in pediatrics, Shannon decides to explore a new employment opportunity as a nurse in a large outpatient family practice setting where she now cares for adult patients as well as children. On a warm summer afternoon, Mr. Williams arrives for an appointment with his physician and sits uncomfortably in the waiting room. He complains of vomiting, diarrhea and colicky abdominal pain. His pain radiates from the right lower abdominal quadrant to the back and increases after he eats. One of Shannon’s colleagues comments, “I’ll bet he has that awful GI flu that’s going around.” Shannon disagrees and hurries to see Mr. Williams’s physician. She tells her, “I’ve seen this a lot in infants. It’s really rare in adults, but I think Mr. Williams has an intussusception. He needs to be seen now!”

Intussusception is a serious, potentially fatal condition in which a portion of either the small intestine or the colon moves into another part of the intestine. This movement is referred to as “telescoping” and can cause a blockage of the intestine, thus preventing the passage of food and fluids as well as cutting off the blood supply to the affected portion of the intestine.5,6,33 Fatalities occur most often if treatment is delayed for more than 24 hours.5

When the bowel segment (the intussusception) moves into another part of the intestine, referred to as invagination, it is moved along the intestine via peristalsis. This movement pulls even more bowel along with it. Invagination causes edema, hemorrhage, incarceration and obstruction. If treatment is not initiated within 24 hours, strangulation of the affected areas of the intestine occurs, resulting in shock, perforation and gangrene.5,9

### Causes and Incidence
Intussusception is seen most often in infants between the ages of 6 months to 1 year. It is twice as common in male infants compared to female infants. Although it can affect adults, the occurrence of intussusception in adults is rare.5,33

The exact cause of the intussusception is unknown. But because there are seasonal peaks, in the spring-summer time period that coincides with enteritis and in the mid-winter period when
respiratory tract infections are prevalent, there may be an association with viral infections. In children, a malignant or benign growth in the intestine may trigger the problem. In adults, several causes of intussusception are suspected. These include:
- Malignant or benign growths in the intestine.
- Adhesions in the intestine.
- Surgical scars in the intestine.
- Motility disorders of the digestive tract.
- Chronic diarrhea.

**Nursing alert!** Once a patient has had intussusception, he or she is at risk to develop it again. Patients must be taught to remain alert for its signs and symptoms and to seek immediate emergency medical treatment if they occur.5,33

**Signs and symptoms**

As noted in the scenario that introduced this topic, intussusception can occur in adults as well as children. Because this is a rare occurrence, nurses must be knowledgeable about presenting signs and symptoms in persons of all ages.

**Nursing alert!** In infants and children there are four primary signs and symptoms of intussusception!:

- The first sign of intussusception in an infant might be abrupt, loud crying. The infants pull their legs up to their abdomen, become pale and diaphoretic, and have grunting respirations. The pain is intermittent, initially occurring at 15- to 20-minute intervals. As time passes, the episodes occur more frequently and last longer.3,33
- Stomach contents are vomited. Patient eventually vomits bile-stained contents or fecal material.8
- The infant’s stools have a “currant-jelly” appearance and contain blood and mucus.5,9
- The abdomen becomes tender and distended, and a sausage-shaped mass can be palpated.5,9

Signs and symptoms that occur in adults include:5,33

- Urgent need to defecate.
- Colic-like abdominal pain and tenderness.
- Vomiting.
- Diarrhea.
- Bloody stools.
- Weight loss.

In adults, the abdominal pain is localized in the right lower quadrant and radiates to the back. This pain increases with eating. In cases of severe intussusception, pain may be agonizing and accompanied by abdominal distention and tachycardia.5

**Diagnosis**

Barium enema is performed to confirm intussusception. Findings show a characteristic “coiled spring” appearance. Barium enema also shows the extent of intussusception. Additional findings include a palpable abdominal mass as well as the signs and symptoms identified in the preceding section.5,33

**Treatment**

For children, treatment is generally either hydrostatic reduction or surgery. In adults, however, surgery is always the treatment of choice.5

Hydrostatic reduction involves dripping a barium solution into the rectum from a height of no more than three feet. Fluoroscopy is used to follow the progression of the barium. The goal is to have the barium washback into the ileum, causing the mass to resolve itself. If this is not accomplished, the patient must have surgery.1

If surgery is necessary, the surgeon first attempts to manually reduce the intussusception by “milking” or stroking the intussusception back through the bowel. If this attempt fails, or if complications such as strangulation, gangrene or perforation are present, a resection of the affected portion of the bowel is performed.5,33

Intussusception is a condition that can be diagnosed with this condition annually.24

Intestinal obstruction

Intestinal obstruction is a complication of various GI disorders and diseases. A common condition, it is estimated that at least 1 in 1,000 patients is diagnosed with this condition annually.24

Intestinal obstruction can be partial or complete blockage of the lumen in either the small or large intestine. The site in 90 percent of patients with intestinal obstruction is the small bowel, which is usually more serious than large bowel obstruction. Untreated complete obstruction, regardless of location, can be fatal within hours from shock and vascular collapse.5

Intestinal obstruction can be classified in three categories:5

1. **Simple:** Intestinal contents cannot move through the bowel, but there are complications or blood flow alterations.
2. **Strangulated:** Blood supply is cut off to the affected section of bowel. This may be partial or complete.
3. **Close-looped:** Both ends of a portion of the bowel are blocked, thus isolating it from the rest of the intestine.

Obstruction of the intestine causes GI secretions, gas and swallowed air to accumulate near the location of the obstruction. Peristalsis increases above and below the obstruction as the bowel tries to force its contents through the blockage. This damages the intestinal mucosa and leads to distention at and above the area of blockage. Distension interferes with venous blood flow and blocks normal absorption. The inability to absorb causes the bowel to secrete water, sodium and potassium into fluids collecting in the lumen.5,33

Small bowel obstruction leads to metabolic alkalosis due to dehydration and loss of acidic gastric contents (gastric hydrochloric acid). Obstruction in the lower bowel causes a loss in alkaline fluids leading to metabolic acidosis.5

**Causes**

In developed countries, the leading cause of small bowel obstruction is adhesions followed by malignancy, Crohn’s disease and hernias.35

Large bowel obstruction is generally due to malignancy.5

**Mechanical obstruction** is due to blockage from foreign objects, such as gallstones or fruit pits; bowel wall compression due to such problems as intussusception; or tumors. Non-mechanical obstruction is due to physiologic alterations such as electrolyte imbalances, the effects of medications that slow peristalsis (e.g., opioids), thrombosis or paralytic ileus.5,34

Paralytic ileus is a form of small bowel obstruction that develops after abdominal surgery. Paralytic ileus causes a decrease or absence of intestinal motility and usually resolves itself within two to three days.5

**Signs and symptoms**

Signs and symptoms can begin with pain, nausea and vomiting and, if untreated, progress to shock, sepsis and death. They can vary depending on the location of the obstruction and whether it is partial or complete.

- **Small intestine obstruction:** Nausea, vomiting, constipation, abdominal distention and colicky pain. Extreme thirst, malaise, and dry oral mucous membranes and tongue may develop. Bowel sounds are heard upon auscultation. These may be quite loud, and may even be heard without the use of a stethoscope. There is pain upon abdominal palpation and rebound tenderness if strangulation of the bowel is present. Untreated obstruction may cause hypovolemic shock. If the small bowel is completely obstructed, extreme peristalsis may develop as the bowel attempts to move its contents through the obstruction. Bowel contents may be moved toward the mouth, and vomitus contains gastric juice, then bile, and eventually, the contents of the ileum.5

- **Large intestine obstruction:** Symptoms progress more slowly because the large bowel can absorb fluid and distend well beyond its typical size. At first, constipation may be the only sign. Then colicky abdominal pain may develop quite swiftly, producing frequent spasms. There is significant abdominal distention. Eventually, vomiting occurs. The vomitus may contain fecal matter; continuous abdominal pain develops, and peritonitis may occur. If the obstruction is partial, these symptoms can occur but in a less severe form. Liquid stool may leak around the obstruction.5

**Diagnosis**

In addition to findings from a history and physical, lab studies may show decreased sodium, chloride and potassium levels due to vomiting and an elevated white blood cell count due to infection (e.g., peritonitis).5

Diagnostic tests such as CT scans, barium enema, upper GI and small-bowel series, and abdominal films are conducted. Small bowel obstruction findings include alternating levels of fluid and gas, sometimes referred to as a “stelpladder” pattern.5,33

Large bowel obstruction findings include a distended, air-filled colon.5
**Treatement**
Initially, immediate treatment includes fluid resuscitation, correction of electrolyte imbalances and administration of analgesics and antiemetics as indicated. Bowel decompression is accomplished by the insertion of a nasogastric tube to suction GI contents and avoid aspiration. Antibiotics that are effective against gram-negative and anaerobic organisms are prescribed.5

Strangulated obstruction requires blood transfusions. Patients must be monitored closely for evidence of shock indicated by pallor, tachycardia and hypotension. If the patient’s condition does not improve or if it deteriorates, surgery is needed.5

Surgical interventions may include removal of tumors and other masses, hernia repair or bowel resection.5 For large bowel obstruction, surgical resection with anastomosis, colostomy or ileostomy may be necessary.5

**Special nursing considerations**
- **Monitor closely for signs and symptoms of metabolic alkalosis:** Changes in levels of consciousness, tetany, twitching, shallow respirations, cardiac arrhythmias and confusion.36
- **Monitor closely for signs and symptoms of metabolic acidosis:** Headache, lethargy, deep, rapid respirations (Kussmaul’s respirations), hypotension, anorexia, stupor.36
- **Monitor intake and output meticulously:** Record amount and color of NG tube drainage.1
- **Monitor for signs of dehydration:** Thick, swollen tongue, dry oral mucous membranes and poor skin turgor.

**Inguinal hernia**
An inguinal hernia occurs when intra-abdominal fat or a portion of the small intestine protrudes through a weakened area in the lower abdominal wall. This type of hernia is located in the groin because the fat or intestine moves through a weak area at the inguinal ring, which is the opening to the inguinal canal. An inguinal hernia appears as a bulge on one or both sides of the groin.37

Inguinal hernias are usually reduced (manipulated back into place) without much difficulty. However, the hernia may become incarcerated due to adhesions that interfere with intestinal flow or strangulated, meaning that the hernia becomes twisted or edematous. In the event of strangulation, normal blood flow and peristalsis are impeded and may lead to intestinal obstruction.5,8

**Nursing alert!** There are a number of common sites of hernia. These include:5,8
- **Femoral:** Develops when a fatty deposit within the femoral canal grows and creates an opening large enough for part of the peritoneum and bladder to move through.
- **Umbilical:** Common in neonates, but also occurs in obese women, or in women who have had a number of pregnancies. It is due to abnormal muscular structure around the umbilical area.
- **Incisional hernia:** Occurs at the site of a previous surgery due to a weakness in the abdominal wall, inadequate wound healing or an infection.

**Causes and incidence**
There are two types of inguinal hernias: direct and indirect. Each type has different causes.

1. **Direct inguinal hernia:** Direct inguinal hernias are congenital in nature and are more common in males than in females and more common than direct hernias. This is because in a male fetus, the spermatic cord and both testicles descend, under normal conditions, through the inguinal canal into the scrotum. But if for some reason the entrance of the inguinal canal does not close just after birth, a weakness is created in the abdominal wall. This allows fat or part of the small intestine to move through weaknesses into the inguinal canal, causing an inguinal hernia. In females, an indirect inguinal hernia occurs when the female organs or the small intestine slides into the groin through a weakness in the abdominal wall.37

2. **Indirect inguinal hernia:** Direct inguinal hernias are due to degeneration of the connective tissue of the abdominal muscles, which leads to weakening of the muscles during adulthood. Direct inguinal hernias only occur in males.8 The hernia passes thorough the weak muscles into the groin. A direct hernia develops as a result of continuous stress on the muscles.5,37 Sudden twists or pulls, lifting heavy objects, straining with bowel movements, weight gain and chronic coughing may all worsen the hernia.37

**Nursing alert!** Be alert to the possibility of incarcerated or strangulated inguinal hernias. An incarcerated inguinal hernia is one that becomes trapped in the groin or scrotum and is unable to be massaged back into the abdomen. An incarcerated hernia can become strangulated, meaning there is serious interference with normal blood flow to the incarcerated area. This can lead to obstruction and necrosis. Strangulated hernia is a serious medical emergency.5,37

**Signs and symptoms**
Typical signs and symptoms of inguinal hernia include:5,37
- A lump or bulge over the herniated area when the patient is in a standing position or strains. The lump or bulge disappears when the patient is lying down.
- Sharp, steady pain in the groin that is exacerbated with lifting, straining or exercising, and is relieved with rest or being in the supine position.
- Feelings of weakness or pressure in the groin.

Strangulation of the hernia, a medical emergency that can lead to partial or complete bowel obstruction, produces the following signs and symptoms:5,37
- Severe pain.
- Redness in the area of the hernia.
- Fever.
- Tachycardia.
- Anorexia.
- Vomiting.
- Infection.
- Absent or diminished bowel sounds.
- Bloody stools.
- Shock.

**Diagnosis**
Upon inspection, a large hernia is evident by swelling, bulging or the presence of a lump in the inguinal area. A small hernia may just appear as an unusual “fullness” in the groin. Signs and symptoms and patient history all help in the diagnosis of inguinal hernia.

An important part of the physical exam in a male patient is essential to confirmation of the diagnosis. The patient is asked to stand with the leg on the same side as the hernia (ipsilateral) slightly flexed and his weight on the other leg. The examiner inserts his/her gloved index finger into the lower part of the scrotum moving the finger through the external inguinal ring to the internal ring throughout the inguinal canal. The patient is asked to cough. If the examiner notes pressure against his/her fingertip, an indirect hernia is present. If pressure is felt against the side of the finger, a direct hernia is present.5

**Treatment**
The treatment of choice for infants, adults and healthy elderly patients is herniorrhaphy. Herniorrhaphy is a surgical procedure during which the contents of the hernia sac are replaced into the abdominal cavity. This procedure is often performed under local anesthesia in a short-term unit.5,37 Another surgical option is hernioplasty, during which the weakened area is reinforced or supported with steel mesh, wire or fascia.5

For elderly or debilitated patients who are not able to tolerate surgery, a truss may be used to keep the abdominal contents from protruding into the hernia sac. This is not a curative measure, but is an option for relieving the discomfort of the hernia.5

Some patients, especially if the hernia is not causing significant discomfort, may delay surgery. They should be cautioned about the potential complications of the disorder and be taught to recognize the signs and symptoms of strangulation and bowel obstruction. Ideally, patients will respond to the need for surgical repair before such complications occur.

After surgery, patients should be taught how to recognize signs and symptoms of infection and to avoid lifting heavy objects or straining during bowel movements.

**Inactive colon**
Connie is a 50-year-old small business owner. She recently fulfilled a long-wished-for dream and opened a craft shop specializing in knitting.
and embroidery products. Prior to opening her shop, Connie worked as a buyer for an exclusive women's boutique. Connie is accustomed to a stressful work situation and to working long hours, but enjoys the challenge of an active career.

She also has to deal with something just as challenging but a lot less enjoyable: chronic constipation. Connie has suffered from constipation for most of her adult life and just shrugged it off as “something I have to live with. It’s probably because of my stressful career.” What Connie doesn’t realize is that the stress and long hours also contribute to her having little or no time to exercise, and she usually eats fast food or skips meals altogether. The constipation seems to be getting worse, and she feels bloated and uncomfortable several days a week. Connie finally decides to tell her doctor about this problem and seek some relief for an issue that has troubled her for years.

Connie is not alone in having to deal with chronic constipation, also referred to as inactive colon, lazy colon, colonic stasis or atomic constipation. Besides causing feelings of bloating and abdominal discomfort, inactive colon can also lead to fecal impaction.5

What is constipation?
Constipation means different things to different people. Bowel habits vary among people. Some people believe that unless they have a bowel movement every day, they are constipated. For others, having a bowel movement every other day is normal. Actually, there is a wide range of what is considered to be normal.

Normal patterns of bowel movements range from as many as three times a day or three times a week, depending on the individual. Constipation is generally defined as having a bowel movement less than three times a week. 5,8,38 Constipation can be self-limiting and short-term or chronic (inactive colon).

Causes and incidence
Constipation is a very common gastrointestinal complaint in the United States. More than 4 million Americans complain of frequent constipation. Persons who report constipation (and seek medical intervention) are most often women and adults 65 years of age and older. Pregnant women also report constipation fairly often, as do women after giving birth and persons who have just had surgery.38

Nursing alert! Elderly patients generally experience reduced intestinal motility and a slowing of neural impulses in the gastrointestinal tract, which can increase the risk of constipation. This same population often limits the amount of fluids they drink to avoid or reduce incontinence. Inadequate fluid consumption also increases the risk of constipation as well as dehydration. Patients who are limited in their physical activity due to age or illness are also at risk for constipation. 5

When a person does not drink enough fluids, more fluid is absorbed from the intestine and stools become hard and dry. Adequate hydration as well as a diet high in fiber causes water to be pulled into stools by osmosis, thus keeping stools soft and facilitating their movement through the intestine.8

Common causes of constipation include:5,9,38
• Low-fiber diet.
• Lack of exercise or limits in ability to be physically active.
• Certain medications, such as opiates and antacids, that interfere with bowel motility.
• Conditions or injuries that interfere with neural pathway functioning (e.g., spinal cord injury, multiple sclerosis, stroke or tumors of the intestine).
• Metabolic and endocrine disorders.
• Overuse or abuse of laxatives.
• Overuse of enemas, which reduce rectal sensitivity to the presence of stool.
• Dehydration.
• Diseases of the colon or rectum.
• Ignoring the urge to have a bowel movement.
• Stress.

Nursing alert! Many medications (in addition to those mentioned above) can affect GI functioning. Certain blood pressure medications, especially calcium channel blockers, and antidepressants, anti-Parkinson drugs, iron supplements, anticonvulsants, antispasmodics and diuretics, may cause constipation in some patients.38

Diagnosis
A history of dry, hard, infrequent bowel movements suggests inactive colon. A proctoscopy may show that the patient has an unusually small colon lumen with abnormal amounts of mucus and the presence of prominent veins.5 It is imperative that a thorough history and physical be conducted to rule out serious disease processes such as malignancies. Testing stool for occult blood, a rectal exam, an upper GI series, barium enema and colonoscopy may be performed.5

Treatment and nursing considerations
Treatment depends on results of the physical examination, the patient’s age and general health, and his/her ability to participate in lifestyle modifications. These initiatives can be preventative as well as used for treatment. Here are the most common interventions for inactive colon or chronic constipation.

• Increase fluid intake: Adequate fluid intake is critical to maintaining homeostasis and avoiding dehydration. Persons should drink at least eight to 10 glasses of liquid on a daily basis. Fluid helps keep stools soft for easy movement through the intestine and facilitates passage from the rectum. Advise patients to drink a hot beverage, such as coffee or tea, or prune juice before or with breakfast to help stimulate the bowel.5,8 Some patients prefer to drink such beverages in the evening. In this case, advise them to drink decaffeinated beverages to avoid interfering with sleep. Older patients or patients with incontinence should avoid drinking large amounts of fluid before bedtime as this increases the possibility of incontinence. Encourage these patients to consume their beverages during the day and early evening.

Nursing alert! Caffeine-containing liquids and beverages that contain alcohol can contribute to dehydration. Encourage the intake of hydrating fluids such as water and beverages that are decaffeinated whenever possible.18

Nursing alert! Some patients may be on fluid restrictions due to other health conditions. Be aware of overall health status and medically ordered fluid restrictions when providing patient education.

• Eat a diet high in fiber: The most common causes of constipation are a diet low in fiber or one that is high in fats such as those contained in cheese, eggs and red meats. Fiber, the part of fruits, vegetables and grains that cannot be digested by the body, takes on a soft, gel-like texture in the intestines, helping to make stools soft and easily eliminated from the body.38 The recommended daily dose of fiber is 20 to 35 grams a day. Unfortunately, Americans consume only a daily average of five to 14 grams of fiber.38 Good sources of fiber include fresh fruits with skins, raw and course vegetables, and whole grain cereals.5

• Avoid foods that are highly refined: These foods include white rice, Cream of Wheat, pasta, candy, cookies and ice cream.5 Avoid eating such foods because they do not help relieve constipation and are often sources of fat.38

• Participate in regular exercise as authorized by health care providers. Moderate physical exercise, such as a walking routine, should be incorporated into daily activities.5,38

Nursing alert! Persons have different tolerance levels for exercise because of age and general health. All persons should consult their health care providers prior to initiating an exercise regimen.

• Identify medications that might contribute to constipation: As noted in the section pertaining to causes of constipation, many medications contribute to the problem of constipation. This includes over-the-counter as well as prescription medications. Patients with inactive colon should discuss and review ALL medications they are taking and include, in addition to prescription and over-the-counter, herbal supplements, vitamins, minerals and weight-control products.

• In cases of severe inactive colon, take laxatives under the direction of health care providers. Bulk-forming laxatives are considered to be among the safest, but can interfere with the effectiveness of certain other medications.38 That is why it is so important to consult with a physician regarding adding any medication to a...
Causes and incidence
Volvulus may be due to an abnormality of rotation, ingestion of a foreign body or an adhesion. The specific cause may never be determined, however. In adults, the most common site of the disorder is the sigmoid colon. In children, the small bowel is a more common site. Other sites include the stomach and the cecum. In patients with cystic fibrosis, volvulus may occur secondary to meconium ileus (an intestinal blockage due to cystic fibrosis).5,38

Acute gastric volvulus has a significant mortality rate of 42 percent to 56 percent.5 There are no known racial differences, and males and females are equally affected.5,39 About 20 percent of cases of volvulus are noted in infants younger than 1 year. Peak incidence is noted in people between the ages of 40 to 50.5

Signs, symptoms, and complications
Volvulus causes vomiting and a rapid, noticeable distention of the abdomen with abrupt onset of severe abdominal pain. Bloody stools, constipation and shock may also occur.5,9 Immediate treatment is necessary to prevent life-threatening complications. Such complications include strangulation of the twisted portion of the bowel, ischemia, infarction, perforation and fatal peritonitis.5

Diagnosis
The symptoms of volvulus may mimic other disorders. The onset of severe pain, abdominal distention and a palpable abdominal mass suggest volvulus.5 Appropriate diagnostic studies include:5,39

- X-rays: Obstruction may be evident as well as the classic double-bubble sign.39 The double-bubble occurs when duodenal obstruction leads to gastric and duodenal distension with a prominent duodenal bulb and air-fluid levels in the proximal duodenum and stomach.39
- CT scans: Evidence of intestinal obstruction may be evident.5
- Upper GI series: Signs of volvulus include incomplete duodenal obstruction.5,39
- Barium enema: Barium enema can show specific areas of the colon that are affected. In volvulus of the cecum, barium fills the colon distal to the affected area. In sigmoid volvulus, findings vary in children and adults. In children, the barium may twist and appear as a “point.” In adults, the barium may take on the appearance of the “ace of spades,” mimicking that configuration from a deck of playing cards.39
- White blood cell (WBC) count: Strangulation generally causes the WBC count to surpass 15,000/ul. If the bowel is infarcted, the WBC count exceeds 20,000/ul.5

Treatment varies according to the age and condition of the patient and whether complications have occurred. In the event of a necrotic bowel (as a result of obstruction or strangulation), immediate surgical resection and anastomosis is indicated.5

Children with midgut volvulus undergo surgical treatment, often with the Ladd procedure. During this surgical procedure a transverse incision is made through the right rectus muscle in the right upper quadrant, which facilitates visualization and access to the intestine. The volvulus is corrected in the majority of patients by rotating the intestine in a counterclockwise direction.39 Sometimes, in adults with sigmoid volvulus, a non-surgical reduction is successful. A proctoscope examination is done to check for the presence of infarction. A sigmoidoscope or long rectal tube is carefully, gently inserted to deflate the bowel. Success is indicated by passage of gas and swift relief from abdominal pain.5

Rectal prolapse
Rectal prolapse is the protrusion of one or more layers of the mucous membrane of the rectal tissue slides through the anal orifice.5,40 There are two types of rectal prolapse: partial and complete.
1. Partial rectal prolapse occurs when only the mucosa is involved. A small and a small mass of radial mucosal folds are involved.5
2. Complete rectal prolapse occurs when the full wall of the anal canal herniates into the perineum. Complete rectal prolapse is also referred to as procidentia.5

Causes and incidence
The exact cause of rectal prolapse is not known, but it is associated with conditions that affect the pelvic floor or rectum. Nearly 50 percent of reported cases of rectal prolapse are caused by chronic straining with bowel movements and constipation.40

Increased intra-abdominal pressure causes the protrusion of the layers of rectal tissue. Additional conditions that increase the risk of rectal prolapse include:5,40
- Diarrhea.
- Benign prostatic hypertrophy.
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).
- Cystic fibrosis.
- Malnutrition and malabsorption.
- Pertussis (whooping cough).
- Pelvic infections.
- Neurological disorders.
- Previous trauma to the anal or pelvic area.

Many cases of rectal prolapse are not reported, making it difficult to determine actual incidence. Rectal prolapse occurs most often in children under the age of 6 and adults in their 60s and 70s. Females experience rectal prolapse more often than males, with females accounting for 80 percent to 90 percent of cases that are reported.5

Nursing alert! In children with cystic fibrosis, the incidence of rectal prolapse is nearly 20 percent.40

Signs and symptoms
Protrusion of rectal tissue when walking or during elimination of stool is the primary sign of rectal prolapse. Other symptoms include:5,40

Volvulus
David is a 45-year-old electrician. He has just spent a relaxing Sunday with his wife, daughter and son. They enjoyed watching his daughter play in her first soccer tournament and celebrated her team’s victory with dinner at their favorite restaurant. Later that evening, David suddenly develops episodes of vomiting and abdominal distention. He blames it on “something I ate” at the restaurant. However, frequent use of enemas may also be involved.5

Overuse of enemas is also contraindicated. Frequent use of enemas can make the bowel dependent on enemas to eliminate stool. In particular, frequent use of sodium biphosphosphate should be avoided because it is a hypertonic solution that can absorb a significant amount of the colon’s sodium or pull intestinal fluids into the colon, thus causing dehydration.5

To help establish a normal pattern of bowel evacuation, a person should include maintaining a regular time for bowel movements (e.g., in the morning or after breakfast). Privacy is important. Using a small footstool to enable thigh flexion while sitting on the toilet may facilitate bowel evacuation. Patients should also be told to respond as soon as possible to the urge to have a bowel movement.5

Nursing alert! Remind patients that there is a wide variation in what is a normal pattern of bowel elimination. This range can vary from three times a day to three times a week.5,38
Ongoing sensations of fullness in the rectum.
Constipation.
Fecal incontinence.
Bloody diarrhea.
Rectal bleeding.
Lower abdominal pain.
Feeling of incomplete evacuation of feces.

**Nursing alert!** Hemorrhoids and/or rectal polyps may exist in conjunction with rectal prolapse.5

**Diagnosis**

**Nursing alert!** Rectal prolapse is often a symptom. The underlying cause must be identified and corrected.40

History, inspection and clinical signs confirm diagnosis. Imaging studies such as a barium enema may be performed to rule out diseases of the colon and/or rectum or the presence of tumors.40

**Treatment**

Sometimes, correcting the underlying cause is the only treatment needed. First, the rectal mucosa may be reduced with gentle digital pressure. The patient is placed in a knee-chest position, and a soft, warm, wet cloth may be used to gently push the mass through the anal opening. Gravity should facilitate the return of the prolapse to its proper place.1 However, the presence of edema of the bowel may make manual reduction problematic. In these types of cases, granulated succrose may be applied topically to the mucosal surface. This may reduce edema and allow for successful manual reduction.40

In children, prolapsed rectal tissue lessens as the child grows. Older patients may require injection of a sclerosing agent that causes a fibrotic reaction and fixes the rectum in its proper place.5

Surgery may be necessary for cases of severe or chronic rectal prolapse. During surgery the sphincters are strengthened or tightened with wire or by anterior or rectal resection of the tissue that prolapsed.7

**Patient education**

It is important that patients understand what measures to take to avoid rectal prolapse or the recurrence of the disorder.5,40

- Prevention of constipation is very important. Teach the patient to drink an adequate amount of fluid every day and to eat a diet that has adequate amounts of fiber and only moderate amounts of fat.
- If ordered, explain how to take medications such as stool softeners to help avoid constipation.
- Explain that rectal incontinence may be a permanent complication of surgery.
- Patients with severe rectal prolapse and incontinence should be advised to wear a perineal pad.
- Teach patients perineal strengthening exercises. For example, the patient should repeatedly squeeze and relax the buttocks while sitting in a chair.

**Hemorrhoids**

Hemorrhoids are varicosities or enlarged veins in the lower part of the rectum and the anus.9,41 Internal hemorrhoids cannot be felt and are found in the inside lining of the rectum. External hemorrhoids are found underneath the skin that surrounds the anal area. These types of hemorrhoids are felt when they swell, and they may cause itching or pain as well as bleeding. A thrombosed external hemorrhoid is the result of blood clotting within veins and can cause the patient significant pain.41

Internal hemorrhoids are covered by mucosa and actually protrude into the rectal lumen. They may prolapse when the patient has bowel movements. External hemorrhoids are covered by skin and protrude from the rectum. These hemorrhoids are more likely to thrombose than internal hemorrhoids.5

Hemorrhoids can be classified according to their severity.9

- **First-degree hemorrhoids:** These are confined to the anal canal.
- **Second-degree hemorrhoids:** These prolapse when the patient strains (e.g., during defecation) but reduce spontaneously.
- **Third-degree hemorrhoids:** These are prolapsed hemorrhoids but must be manually reduced after each bowel movement.
- **Fourth-degree hemorrhoids:** These hemorrhoids are severe and cannot be reduced.

**Causes and incidence**

Hemorrhoids are most likely due to increased venous pressure. Factors that predispose the development of hemorrhoids include:5,9

- Prolonged periods of sitting or standing.
- Straining during defecation (often associated with constipation).
- Straining during coughing, sneezing or vomiting.
- Heart failure.
- Liver disease.
- Alcoholism.
- Anal/rectal infections.
- Rectal surgery.
- Pregnancy.
- Anal intercourse.
- Loss of muscle tone (often due to old age).

Hemorrhoids are quite common. They are more common in whites, those who are of higher socioeconomic status, and those who live in rural areas.5 The exact incidence of hemorrhoids is unknown because many people do not seek medical help for the problem. However, it is estimated that hemorrhoids occur in up to 50 percent of the population by age 50.42

**Signs and symptoms**

Hemorrhoids may not cause any symptoms at all. But symptoms generally increase with the severity of the problem. First-degree hemorrhoids, although they may be painless, characteristically cause painless, intermittent bleeding with defecation. The patient may report bright red blood on the toilet paper or on stool. Bleeding occurs as the result of injury to the mucosa that covers the hemorrhoids. These hemorrhoids may cause itching if anal hygiene is poor.5,41

Second-degree hemorrhoids result in more severe characteristic symptoms with the addition of hemorrhoid prolapse, which spontaneously resolves itself after the patient has a bowel movement. These hemorrhoids are usually painless.5,9

Third-degree hemorrhoids cause ongoing discomfort and prolapse whenever there is an increase in intra-abdominal pressure. These third-degree hemorrhoids must be manually reduced.5

Thrombosis of external hemorrhoids causes abrupt rectal pain and a large, firm lump that can be felt by the patient. Such hemorrhoids may cause bleeding that is severe enough to cause secondary anemia. In these cases, the patient may complain of fatigue and weakness, exhibit significant pallor and ultimately lead to secondary anemia.5,9

**Nursing alert!** Tell patients that ALL occurrences of rectal bleeding must be evaluated by a health care professional. Rectal bleeding may be a symptom of a serious problem, such as cancer. All too often, people assume that rectal bleeding is due to hemorrhoids and fail to report it.

**Diagnosis**

Physical examination confirms the diagnosis of external hemorrhoids. It is important that a proctoscopy be performed to diagnosis internal hemorrhoids and to rule out polyps or other conditions.5,9

**Treatment**

Treatment depends on the type and severity of the hemorrhoids. For hemorrhoids that are not severe, lifestyle modifications are often the foundation of treatment as well as measures initiated for symptoms relief. The goals of treatment are to reduce or eliminate pain, fight swelling and congestion, and to facilitate defecation without straining.5,9

One of the first steps is to eliminate constipation and teach patients measures to prevent constipation and straining during defecation. Patients should drink adequate amounts of fluids and increase the amount of fiber in their diets by increasing their intake of raw vegetables and fruit and whole grain cereals. They should take stool softeners as recommended by their health care providers.5,9

**Nursing alert!** Patients should be taught to avoid straining during defecation!

Patients need to avoid sitting or standing for prolonged periods of time. If their jobs often cause them to sit or stand for long periods of time, they should be taught to take breaks when...
they can stand and move around (if they are sitting for too long) or move about and/or sit for short periods (if they are standing in one place for too long). Patients should be cautioned not to sit on the toilet for long periods of time to avoid venous congestion.9

Local anesthetic agents in the form of lotions, creams or suppositories may be used to decrease local swelling and pain. Hydrocortisone cream and suppositories may be used to reduce edema, itching and prolapsed hemorrhoids. Warm sitz baths may also provide some pain relief.5,9

Hemorrhoidectomy by cautery or excision is the most effective treatment and is required for patients experiencing severe pain or bleeding, significant prolapse and itching. However, surgical intervention is contraindicated in persons with diseases of the blood such as leukemia, aplastic anemia or hemophilia, GI cancer, or during the first trimester of pregnancy.5,9

After surgery, stress to the patient how important it is to avoid constipation and to ensure good anal hygiene. Patients should not use harsh soaps over the anal area or cleanse the area too vigorously.9

Intestinal polyps
Intestinal polyps are masses of tissue that project from the surface of the mucous membrane. They may develop in the colon or rectum where they protrude into the GI tract. Most polyps do not cause symptoms except for minor rectal bleeding, which is not usually detectable by observation (occult bleeding). Although most polyps are usually benign, they may become cancerous.5,42

Nursing alert! It is important to encourage patients to undergo screening colonoscopies as they reach the age of 50 and periodically thereafter as recommended by their physicians. Patients with a history of polyps, a family or personal history of colon cancer, or those who are having symptoms may need to begin having colonoscopies at an earlier age.

There are several types of polyps, including polypoid adenomas, villous adenomas, hereditary polyposis, focal polypoid hyperplasia and juvenile polyps. As noted, most polyps are benign. However, villous and hereditary polyps have a significant inclination to become cancerous.5

Causes and incidence
Polyps occur as a result of unrestrained cell growth in the upper epithelium. Factors that increase the risk of polyp development include age, infection, high-fat, low-fiber diet, and heredity.9

The incidence of polyps for both males and females increases after the age of 70. Juvenile polyps are most commonly found in children less than 10 years of age. Villous adenomas are most commonly found in men over the age of 55. Polypoid adenomas are most prevalent in white women between the ages of 45 and 60.5,9

Signs, symptoms, and diagnosis
Most patients with polyps are asymptomatic, although rectal bleeding may occur. Diagnosis requires visualization via proctosigmoidoscopy or colonoscopy.9

Treatment
Polyps are generally removed for biopsy during procedures such as colonoscopy. Further treatment depends on the results of the biopsy. Benign polyps generally require no further treatment after their removal except for adherence to screening colonoscopies as recommended by their health care providers. If a malignancy is diagnosed, treatment depends on the type of cancer and its stage.

Proctitis
Proctitis is an inflammation of the rectal mucosa. It can be acute or a chronic condition. Proctitis causes discomfort, bleeding, and at times, the discharge of pus or mucus.5

Causes
There are several factors that lead to the development of proctitis.
- Proctitis can be caused by a sexually transmitted disease (STD), especially among those who participate in anal intercourse. STDs that can cause proctitis include gonorrhea, herpes, Chlamydia and lymphogranuloma venereum. Amebiasis is also a causative factor and can be transmitted via anal-oral sex.5,43
- Autoimmune response can also cause proctitis and is associated with disorders such as Crohn’s disease and ulcerative colitis.5,43
- Proctitis may be a side effect of medications, radiation treatment or the insertion of foreign objects or chemicals into the rectum.5,43
- In children, the most common example of non-sexually transmitted proctitis is infection with beta-hemolytic streptococcus, the same bacteria that cause strep throat.5,43

Nursing alert! Patients receiving radiation therapy, especially for treatment of cancers of the cervix or uterus, need to be taught to be alert to the signs and symptoms of proctitis.5

The risk of proctitis increases with certain factors that have the potential to irritate the rectal area. These include:5,9
- Food allergies, particularly an allergy to milk.
- Chronic constipation.
- Habitual or overuse of laxatives.
- Injury to the rectum.
- Interference with normal muscle control.
- Emotional distress.

Signs and symptoms
Signs and symptoms include:5,9,43
- Stools that contain blood and mucus.
- Constipation.
- Rectal discharge containing pus.
- Rectal pain.
- Pain when having a bowel movement (tenesmus).
- Feeling of rectal fullness.
- Left-sided abdominal cramps.
- Intense urge to have a bowel movement.

Diagnosis
A detailed patient history is obtained, including questions about the patient’s sexual practices.

Nursing alert! It is important to remain objective, supportive and non-judgmental. Sexually transmitted diseases still carry a negative stigma, particularly those that are associated with anal sex. All patients deserve compassionate care delivered to the best of the health care professionals’ abilities.

A sigmoidoscopy may be performed that reveals, in acute proctitis, shiny, thick, bright red or pink rectal mucosa that may be ulcerated. In chronic proctitis, results may include thickened mucosa, rectal lumen stricture and loss of normal vascular patterns.5

Treatment
Antibiotics specific for the organisms causing the disorder are administered in the presence of infection. If the proctitis is the result of radiation therapy, steroid suppositories or soothing enemas may help to relieve symptoms. Tranquilizers may be helpful for patients having difficulty dealing with emotional stress.5,9

Anorectal abscesses and fistulas
An anorectal abscess is due to inflammation of the soft tissue near the rectum or anus. Pus collects in the localized area of inflammation. Inflammation may cause an abnormal opening in the anal skin that can communicate with the rectum.5,44

Causes and incidence
The development of an abscess may start when the lining of the anal canal or rectum is torn or suffers an abrasion and subsequent infection with Escherichia coli, staphylococci, or streptococci.5

Additional causes include:5,9,44
- Trauma.
- Treatment of internal hemorrhoids.
- Puncture wounds (e.g., from ingested fish bones as they are eliminated from the body).
- Pre-existing lesions.
- Systemic illnesses such as ulcerative colitis and Crohn’s disease.

As the production of pus increases, a fistula may develop in the soft tissues beneath the sphincters’ muscle fibers. This is most likely to occur beneath the muscle fiber of the external sphincter.5

Anorectal abscesses have a peak incidence among adults in their 30s and 40s. However, there is also a high rate of occurrence in infants. It is estimated that about 30 percent of patients have a prior history of anorectal abscess. Such abscesses are two to three times more common in men than in women.5,9

Nursing alert! Anal fissures in children may be a sign of sexual abuse.44

Signs and symptoms
Characteristic signs and symptoms of anorectal abscess include:5,9,44
- Rectal pain that is often described as throbbing, burning, cutting or tearing.
Nursing alert! Spasm of the anus is highly suggestive of an anal fissure.44

Diagnosis
An anorectal abscess is detected upon rectal examination. Sometimes the abscess drains by forming a fistula. If so, the pain subsides and intense itching occurs. The external opening of the fistula looks like a pink or red elevated ulcer near the anus. Additional signs and symptoms depend on the severity of the co-existing infection. These include chills, fever, nausea, vomiting and fatigue.4

A palpable indurated tract may be noted upon rectal digital exam, and pus may be evident on the examiner’s gloved finger. It may be necessary to perform a proctosigmoidoscopy to rule out other diseases.5,9

Treatment
The anorectal abscess must be surgically incised under caudal anesthesia to promote drainage of infected material. Fistulas are treated by removing the fistula and granulated tissue (referred to as a fistulotomy) under caudal anesthesia. Warm sitz baths, analgesics and antibiotics may also be part of the treatment regimen.5,44

Nursing considerations
Nurses need to be aware of several considerations. These include:5,44

Teach the patients the importance of perianal cleanliness. This may be an embarrassing topic for some patients. Nurses should be tactful and objective while providing information about perianal hygiene.

Teach the patient to be alert to the signs and symptoms of abscesses and fistulas and to seek prompt medical attention.

Patients may suppress the urge to have a bowel movement for fear of pain. This could lead to constipation and even fecal impaction. Teach the importance of a diet that consists of adequate fluid intake and fiber. Facilitate the administration of stool softeners as ordered.

References

DISEASES AND DISORDERS OF THE GASTROINTESTINAL TRACT
Self Evaluation Exercises
Choose True or False for questions 1 through 8 and check your answers at the bottom of the page.

1. The accessory glands and organs of the GI system consist of the salivary glands, liver, gallbladder and bile ducts, and the pancreas.

   True  False

2. Mallory-Weiss syndrome is characterized by rectal bleeding from a mucosal tear in the intestine.

   True  False

3. Alcohol increases gastric acid production and decreases lower esophageal sphincter pressure, which can exacerbate symptoms of GERD.

   True  False

4. Chronic infection with helicobacter pylori (H pylori) is associated with a significant risk of gastric cancer.

   True  False

5. Your next-door neighbor is complaining of right lower abdominal pain. She is nauseous and has a low-grade fever. A good way to help relieve the pain is to apply a heating pad to the right lower abdomen.

   True  False

6. Crohn’s disease and ulcerative colitis are names for the same disease.

   True  False

7. Anal cancer is closely linked to human papillomavirus (HPV) infection, a sexually transmitted disease.

   True  False

8. An important part of the treatment for celiac disease is an increase in products containing wheat, barley, rye, and oats.

   True  False

CHAPTER 2
GERIATRIC ASSESSMENT
(8 CONTACT HOURS)

Learning objectives

- Discuss demographics related to the geriatric population.
- Perform a “first glance” assessment.
- Review the importance of providing culturally appropriate care.
- Assess the nutritional status of the geriatric patient.
- Offer the geriatric patient practical suggestions for maintaining a healthy diet.
- Describe the physiological responses of the elderly adult’s body to medications.
- Explain how to facilitate safe management of medication regimens in the older adult.
- Initiate sexual assessment of the geriatric patient.
- Assess the sleep patterns of the older adult.
- Identify strategies for pain assessment in the older adult.
- Identify pain reduction measures for the older adult.
- Assess mental health in the elderly adult.
- Recognize signs and symptoms of elder abuse.
- Describe changes in vision, hearing and sensation that affect the aging adult.
- Describe normal age-related changes in the integumentary system.
- Identify common health problems related to the integumentary system in the older adult.
- Assess the aging adult for potential problems related to cardiovascular functioning.
- Identify lung disorders commonly found in older patients.
- Identify important aspects of assessment of the endocrine system.
- Explain the ways age influences hematologic function.
- Recognize common health problems of the nervous system in the older adult.
- Review age-related issues of the genitourinary system.
- Assess the musculoskeletal system of the geriatric patient.
- Recognize age-related immune system deficiencies related to the aging process.

Introduction

The needs of persons over the age of 65 will continue to place significant demands on the health care system for the foreseeable future. In 2009, it was estimated that nearly 13 percent of the population of the United States was over the age of 65.10 The number of adults living into late adulthood is increasing dramatically. It is predicted that by 2050, the number of people over the age of 60 in developed countries will reach 416 million. According to the World Health Organization, the fastest-growing segment of this population is persons 80 years of age and older.6

Older adults often have one or more chronic illnesses or conditions, such as urinary incontinence, dementia, cardiovascular disease and diabetes mellitus. In fact, nearly 80 percent of older adults have one or more chronic health problems.4 Although older adults make up the majority of those who use health care services, most are able to live independently in the community. This means, however, that nurses must be quite knowledgeable in the delivery of geriatric services in both inpatient and outpatient settings, including such services as preventive care, risk identification, patient education and promotion of maximum health and wellness.

The health care demands of a dramatically aging population require a workforce of nurses skilled in geriatrics. As a result, there has been a significant increase in the amount and depth of gerontological nursing content in baccalaureate schools of nursing during the past 15 years.3 There is a corresponding need for continued education on gerontological nursing for licensed professionals and nursing assistants. Nurses play a critical role in helping older adults to effectively manage health problems, create and maintain safe and healthy living environments, and live lives of dignity and quality.4 One of the most important ways nurses can do this is to perform a thorough assessment of their geriatric patients. Such assessments require that nurses be astute observers and excellent communicators.

A good assessment begins with the nurse’s first glimpse of the patient.

Assessment at first glance

Assessment begins with your first glimpse of the patient. So many things can be observed in these first few moments. Start with the patient’s appearance. How is the patient dressed? Is the clothing appropriate for the time of year and the weather? Are clothes neat and clean? Do they fit properly? Is the patient clean? Do you smell any unusual odors such as urine, which may indicate incontinence problems, or sweat, which may indicate lack of hygiene? Are the patient’s hands and fingernails clean? Is there any evidence of unusual bruising or injury such as lacerations, scars or burn marks?

At first glance, what is the patient’s mobility status? Is he ambulating independently or does he require assistance? Does the patient use any assistive devices such as a cane or a walker? Observe the quality of his gait. Is balance maintained without difficulty? Are movements of all extremities without tremors?

How does the patient respond to the nurse’s initial greeting? Is the response appropriate? Does the patient speak clearly and distinctly? Are his facial features symmetrical? If not, what abnormalities are present? (For example, is one side of the face drooping or is one eyelid drooping?) Is the patient oriented to person, place and time? Does he maintain eye contact (if culturally appropriate)? Is he able to respond to simple questions such as “How are you feeling today?”

Does the patient wear glasses? Does he seem able to see his surroundings without difficulty? Can the patient hear what you are saying, assuming you are speaking clearly and distinctly and in a normal tone of voice? Does the patient wear hearing aids?

Is the patient alone or is he accompanied by a family member or friend? Observe the interaction between the patient and whoever accompanies him. Does the patient seem comfortable with this companion? Do they interact appropriately? Does the patient give any indication that he is intimidated by his companion?

What, briefly, is the patient’s health history? For example, is there a history of heart attack, stroke, diabetes, other conditions? What medications is the patient taking?

What is the patient’s cultural and ethnic background? Is English his first language? If not, how well is the patient able to communicate in English? Will an interpreter need to be present during the assessment to facilitate communication?

Remember that you need to adapt your communication to the specific needs of the geriatric patient. Never assume that because a patient is elderly that he will be unable or unwilling to participate actively in his health care regimen. Communicate directly with the patient whenever possible. Don’t bypass him or belittle him by talking to family or friends instead. Make sure that, if needed, he has his glasses on and hearing aids in place. And always let him know exactly what you are doing during assessment.1

Ask patients how they would like to be addressed. Ask if they may call them by their first names or if they would prefer to be addressed as Mr., Mrs., Ms. Never, ever “talk down” to an elderly patient by calling him or her “sweetie,” “dear,” or other such names. They are not infants or children and should be treated with respect. Introduce yourself by giving your full name and your title/role. For example, “My name is Andrea Burns. I am a registered nurse, and I will be taking care of you today.”

The “first glance” of the patient can provide a great deal of information about the patient’s physical, mental and emotional state. Use this first glance as a foundation for the detailed assessment of the geriatric patient.

Cultural considerations

Cultural considerations must be incorporated into geriatric physical assessment. Failure to provide culturally appropriate and competent care can lead to lack of patient compliance, frustration and even hostility. Patients need and expect that their cultural perspectives will be respected.

The shift in minority demographics in the United States has changed significantly in the past 10 years. According to the United States Census Bureau, the 2000 census indicated that the white, non-Hispanic majority was 69.1 percent.7 In 2008, this percentage had decreased to 65.6 percent.10

In May 2007, Census Bureau data suggested that one in three U. S. residents is a minority. In fact,
it is predicted that by 2020, people of color will be the majority population.9

Cultural sensitivity encompasses many issues. Culture is complex and is made up of thoughts, values, beliefs and traditions of racial, ethnic, religious or social groups.9 Culture influences moral beliefs, traditions, communication, gender and familial roles, expressions of emotion, family interactions, diet, dress and beliefs about health and wellness. The large number of different cultures that exist in the U.S. make it impossible for all health care providers to have an intimate knowledge of all of them. Here are some suggestions to encompass cultural appropriateness into the assessment process:

- Identify the various cultural populations for which you are most likely to provide health care services.
- Familiarize yourself with appropriate cultural responses for these populations. For example, in Middle Eastern cultures, sexual segregation is often very important, and same-sex caregivers should be assigned whenever possible.
- Investigate the availability of interpreters to facilitate communication if the patient has difficulty communicating in English.
- Develop written patient education materials in the most common languages (in addition to English) that are spoken by your patient populations.
- Remember to be sensitive to dietary practices that are important to cultural and religious viewpoints.
- Remember that expression of emotions may vary from culture. Some cultures are vocal and overt about expressing fear or pain, while others are stoic. All expressions should be respected.
- Identify cultural and religious viewpoints concerning death and dying, life-prolonging interventions (such as feeding tubes), treatment of the body after death and funeral practices.9
- Consult appropriate resources to gather information about cultural perspectives. One such resource is www.gggalanti.com. This site offers respectful cultural profiles of various populations, resources, articles and related links. When using Web sites, make sure that they treat all cultures with respect. Be wary of and avoid sources that criticize or make jokes about cultures or religious practices.

The age of a person or the generation he was born into also influences the way health care services are perceived. For example, the “traditional” generation, also known as the “veterans,” are those adults born between 1922 and 1946 and represent the oldest members who access health care in this country. As a rule, these people are more formal in their approach to life and often preferred to be addressed as Mr., Mrs. or other formal titles. They generally have a strong work ethic and a rigid view of hierarchy and respect for authority. This may make it difficult for them to ask questions or participate actively in their health care plans because they often view health care providers as authority figures.13

It is important to encourage questions and facilitate active communication between older adults and health care professionals. When possible, a reliable family member or friend should accompany the older adult to facilitate communication when needed.

Nutritional assessment
Nutritional assessment is much more than an evaluation of the intake of nutrients and the body’s ability to effectively use nutrients. It starts with the mouth and oral cavity and includes the patient’s ability to taste and smell, the body composition of the older adult, alcohol use, access to food and socioeconomic factors that influence nutritional status.

Assessment of the mouth and oral cavity

Important questions to ask

The ability to eat depends, in part, on a person’s teeth. Observe your patient’s teeth. Are they his own or does he wear dentures? Are dentures, including partial dentures, clean, and do they fit well? Are his teeth clean? Is there any evidence of chipped, broken or missing teeth and/or dentures? Additional important information that should be obtained about a patient’s dental habits includes:

- How does he take care of his teeth/dentures? Is he physically and mentally capable of taking care of his teeth and mouth? Teeth should be brushed and flossed at least twice a day. A soft-bristled toothbrush should be used to properly clean teeth and to avoid damaging gums.9
- How often does he visit a dentist? The geriatric patient should see a dentist at least annually, with the ideal time frame of every six months. These visits should also include a screening for oral cancers such as cancer of the tongue at each visit.
- Does the patient use alcohol and/or tobacco products? Explain to the patient that avoiding these products decreases the risk for oral or lung cancers.4,9
- Does the patient have bad breath? What does it smell like? Bad breath (halitosis) may indicate poor oral hygiene or certain disease processes. For example, a fruity smelling breath suggests hyperglycemia.
- Does the patient report any problems with the oral cavity, such as painful teeth or gums, bleeding gums, dry mouth, changes in the sense of taste, or problems chewing or swallowing?
- Does the patient complain of having a dry mouth? This is the most common oral problem in the elderly adult and can be due to mouth breathing, dehydration, oxygen therapy, various diseases, side effects of medication, and head and neck radiation treatments.

Assessment Tip: A frequent complication of dry mouth is the fungal infection oral candidiasis, more commonly known as thrush.

Inspection
Inspect the patient’s lips, teeth, tongue, gums, soft and hard palate, buccal mucosa and the back of the throat. Look for any signs of cracks, bleeding, lesions, ulcers, swelling, induration or broken or decayed teeth. If the patient wears dentures, observe how they fit, whether they are clean, and whether there is any evidence of breakage. Look for signs of leukoplakia, which is a white or gray patch that may develop on the tongue, on the floor of the mouth or on the buccal mucosa. Leukoplakia is most commonly found in elderly patients and is due to irritation from teeth or dentures that rub against the inside of the cheeks or gums or chronic irritation from use of tobacco products. Leukoplakia is usually painless and is generally biopsied to rule out oral cancers.12

When inspecting the mouth and oral cavity, remain alert to signs and symptoms of oral cancer. These include:

- A lump or thickening of the lip or in the patient’s mouth.
- A sore in the mouth or on the lip that does not heal.
- White or red patches on the gums, tongue or buccal mucosa.
- Patient complains that there is always a feeling of something “stuck” in the throat.
- Swelling of the jaw or mouth that changes the way dentures fit.
- Pain in the ear or when chewing or swallowing.
- Changes in the patient’s voice.

Assessment Tip: When inspecting the mouth and oral cavity, make sure that extra light is available to allow good visualization of the tongue, buccal mucosa, lips, teeth and gums.

It is important to be aware of risk factors for the development of oral problems. Diseases or other factors that cause oral problems will affect the patient’s ability to consume food and maintain a state of proper nutrition. Issues and factors that increase the risk for oral problems include:

- Diseases such as cancer, HIV and AIDS, diabetes mellitus, stroke, dementia, renal failure and viruses such as herpes simplex.
- Deficiencies of vitamins including B6, B12, folic acid, C, K, A, and niacin.
- Changes that accompany aging, such as thinning teeth enamel, lines and cracks in teeth, thinner and smoother mucosa that loses elasticity, and a decrease production of saliva.

Assessment Tip: After inspecting the mouth and oral cavity, palpate the lymph nodes in the neck. Lymph nodes should be small, smooth, round and painless. Tenderness may indicate infection. Enlarged, fixed, hard lymph nodes require further evaluation as these signs may indicate a serious problem, such as malignancy. At the same time, observe the neck for any lesions, moles or bulging areas.

Another important risk factor for oral problems (and corresponding nutritional problems) is lack of money. Elderly adults living on a fixed and/or inadequate income may not have the money
to schedule regular dental visits, or purchase dentures and oral hygiene products. Persons with financial problems should be referred to local dental practices that offer services at reduced rates. They should also be helped to identify stores where dental supplies may be purchased at minimal costs (such as dollar stores).

Transportation may also be an issue. Find out whether patients have access to public transportation or whether they have family members or friends who are able to help them get to dental visits and purchase oral hygiene supplies. Remember that assessment of the oral cavity and mouth involves much more than physical assessment techniques. Finances, mental acuity, transportation and family/friend assistance play important parts in good dental hygiene.

**Taste assessment**

After about the age of 70, adults begin to experience a reduced sense of taste, which is called hypoguesia. The ability to perceive the tastes of salt and sweet are most affected. Taste buds are located on the tongue, epiglottis, larynx and the first third of the esophagus.9

In addition to the normal changes of aging, many factors contribute to a diminished sense of taste. These include poor dental hygiene, broken teeth or dentures, and dry mouth. There are also quite a few medications that adversely affect taste. These include:

- Antibiotics.
- Antidepressants.
- Antihypertensives.
- Anti-cancer drugs.
- Antihistamines.
- Decongestants.
- Muscle relaxants.
- Cholesterol-lowering drugs.
- Drugs used to treat Parkinson’s disease.

**Assessment Tip:** Not every drug in the preceding classifications necessarily alters taste. Be sure to determine which medications patients are taking and check to see whether these drugs have an impact on the sense of taste.

Sometimes the sense of taste can be affected by the environment in which a patient eats. Elderly adults who live alone may not be as interested in preparing meals or in eating them compared to the days when they prepared meals for a family and ate food with others. Encourage adults to eat in a comfortable, relaxed surrounding as much as possible and to take the time to enjoy a meal. Help patients to select foods that are easy to prepare, nutritious, and that they like.

**Assessing the sense of smell**

Problems with the sense of smell (olfactory) are quite common (even more common than problems with taste) in older adults. In fact, about half of adults over the age of 60 experience alterations in their sense of smell.9 The medical term for reduced sense of smell is hyposmia.9 A lack of sense of smell can be dangerous. The inability to smell smoke, gas or spoiled food can actually lead to illness or death. If severe enough, hyposmia can reduce appetite to the point that the older adult becomes malnourished.9

There are a number of factors that contribute to hyposmia. These include age-related changes, such as reduction in the number of sensory cells, injury to the olfactory mucosa and alterations to the structure of the upper airway hypothalamus and olfactory tract.9 Other factors include nasal congestion, smoking and drug use.4

Sometimes nurses and physicians simply assume that a decreased sense of smell is due to a person’s age. But it could also be the result of damage to the olfactory nerve (cranial nerve I). It is important to assess the function of this nerve by first checking to be sure that both nostrils are patent and unobstructed. Then ask the patient to close his eyes. Occlude one nostril and place a familiar, strong-smelling substance (such as coffee, peppermint or orange peel) under his nose and ask him to identify it. Do the same thing with the other nostril. The patient should be able to identify each smell correctly. If olfactory nerve damage is suggested, the patient will need further evaluation.4

**Assessment tip:** Be sure that you use scents with which the patient is familiar. He can’t identify a scent if he has never smelled it before.

**Body composition changes in the older adult**

There are a number of changes in body composition in the older adult that can have an impact on nutrition and overall health. One such change is the loss of lean muscle mass that occurs with aging. The loss is due to a reduction in physical activity, hormone production and alterations in nutrition. If caloric intake continues at the rate consumed at a younger adult, the older adult will gain weight in the form of fat, not muscle.9

Loss of muscle mass is associated with a reduction in strength and endurance and an increased risk for falls. Research indicates that even a 10 percent loss of muscle mass is linked to increased mortality in older adults.9 Other body changes that directly or indirectly influence body composition include:

- **Loss of bone mineral density**, which increases the risk for osteoporosis in both men and women. Loss of bone density increases the risk of fractures as well as the risk of falls.
- **Decrease in both the size and number of gastric glands and mucous membranes**, and reduction in gastric acid production, can lead to atrophic gastritis (irritation of the stomach due to atrophy). The decrease in gastric acid production results in a decrease in the acidity of the stomach. Since iron and vitamin B12 need an acid environment for proper absorption, this lack of acidity can inhibit the absorption of both of these substances.9
- **Peristalsis in the intestines slows** as the adult ages. If this is compounded by a lack of fluid and fiber intake, lack of exercise or chronic illnesses, constipation can, and often does, occur.4,9
- **Aging diminishes the thirst drive**. Because of this, the fluid intake of older adults is often inadequate. Compounded by the aging kidney’s inability to efficiently concentrate urine, this lack of fluid intake often leads to dehydration in geriatric patients. If older patients experience vomiting and/or diarrhea, excessive sweating, or excessive urination due to diuretic therapy, they must be carefully monitored for signs and symptoms of dehydration. Such symptoms include dry skin, poor skin turgor, dark-colored urine, headache, dizziness, dry mucous membranes, increased heart rate and respirations, and confusion.9
- **Older adults often experience vision changes** that compromise the sense of sight. These include cataracts, macular degeneration and generalized deterioration of vision. Such changes can make it difficult, and unpleasant, for them to shop, prepare food and, at times, eat. Reduced vision may make it necessary for someone to transport elderly people to the grocery store, help them to purchase food and even prepare it. The nurse may need to put the older adult in touch with services such as Meals on Wheels and community groups that assist elders in these activities. Many public transportation companies offer elder services at reduced rates. Older patients need assistance to access community services that will help them with transportation, shopping and meal preparation/delivery.

**Assessment tip:** Older adults are often afraid of being incontinent of urine. Because of this fear, they may limit their fluid intake, which further increases the risk for dehydration.

**Socioeconomic impact on nutrition**

It is important that socioeconomic factors be included as part of the nutritional assessment of the geriatric patient. These have been mentioned briefly in the preceding sections, but deserve additional emphasis.

Nutritional intake is closely linked to socialization. Where we eat, how we eat, and with whom we eat can have as much of an impact as what we eat. When assessing the social aspects of nutrition, consider the following issues:

- **With whom does the older adult eat?** If he eats with others, is it in a home setting or long-term care setting such as assisted living? If he eats with others, is the atmosphere congenial? For example, if the older adult is living with an adult child, is he made to feel welcome and a part of the family’s social interactions? If he eats in a long-term setting, in what type of an environment are meals served? Is the environment conducive to enjoying a meal?
- **If the older adult lives at home, does he have easy access to a grocery store?** Does he drive or does he depend on others to transport him? Is he aware of public
transportation options for transportation and how to access them? If needed, is he aware of options such as Meals on Wheels and other similar community services?

- If the older adult does have access to a grocery store, is he physically capable of shopping and carrying bags of groceries or does he need help? If he needs help, who is available to help him? Does he have the visual acuity to read and understand food product labels and prices? Does he have the mental acuity to make appropriate food choices?

Another important aspect of nutritional assessment is the financial impact of food purchase:

- Does the older adult have enough money to purchase healthy foods? If not, he may purchase whatever “fits” within his budget, even if such foods are not recommended for his state of health. For example, does he purchase microwave dinners that are high in salt because they are cheap and easy to prepare, even though he is on a limited salt diet?

- Does the elderly adult need help managing his money? He may have adequate financial resources but is unable to live within his budget due to uncertainty over prices or decreasing mental acuity. Does he have anyone to help him manage his money? What family or community resources are available to assist him with money management?

If there is not enough money to purchase food, the older adult needs to be referred to agencies that may be able to help or to make referrals. Possible sources are veterans associations, area agencies on aging, church groups and government assistance agencies.

**Assessment tip:** Always include socioeconomic evaluation as part of physical assessment. These areas influence every aspect of health. Also note that women are twice as likely as men to live in poverty.9

**Nutritional requirements**

Nutritional requirements for older adults correlate with the physical changes that accompany aging. There are generally decreased caloric needs due to decreased physical activity. However, the need for vitamins and minerals does not decrease. In fact, based on food intake, there may actually be a need for vitamin supplements.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Pyramid is a tool often used by health care professionals and others to plan balanced diets. Nutrition faculty in the Department of Family, Youth, and Community Sciences, IFAS, University of Florida in Gainesville, Florida, have adapted the USDA’s MyPyramid in a handout titled “MyPyramid for Older Adults.”15

This tool is based on an 1,800-calorie diet and should be adapted to the individual needs of each elderly patient. It encourages older adults to choose foods high in fiber to avoid constipation, to drink plenty of fluids to maintain hydration, reduce salt intake, and use fish, nuts and liquid oils instead of saturated fats. Practical suggestions to remain active include going for walks, working in a garden, taking an exercise class at a community center or gym, and playing with pets.15 These suggestions may be helpful when working with older patients and teaching them about nutritional requirements. Additional examples (based on an 1,800-calorie diet) of good dietary habits include the following.15 Note that these suggestions should be adapted to the unique needs and health status of each patient.

- Eat 6 ounces of grains per day, such as whole-grain cereals, whole grain breads, rice or pasta. Choose cereals fortified with vitamin B12.
- Eat 2½ cups of vegetables, especially dark-green and orange vegetables, and dried beans and peas.
- Eat 1½ cups of fruit per day.
- Drink 3 cups of milk or other calcium-rich foods daily, such as low fat milk or yogurt or low fat cheeses.
- Eat 5 ounces of lean meat, beans and other sources of protein, such as low-fat meats and poultry, and include fish, eggs, beans and nuts as protein sources. Bake, broil or grill foods rather than fry them.

There are some vitamin requirements specific to the needs of older adults. These include:

- **Vitamin D** is important to maintain bone mineralization and to facilitate proper use of calcium in the body. Inadequate amounts of vitamin D have been linked to increased risk for falls in the elderly. If adults have limited exposure to the sun (e.g. those who reside in long-term care facilities without much time outside), they may be at increased risk for vitamin D deficiency. Good food sources of vitamin D include liver, milk fortified with vitamin D, fish such as salmon, and milk and juices fortified with vitamin D. If vitamin D deficiency is not corrected by diet, older adults may be prescribed vitamin D supplements by a physician.

- **Calcium** intake is important to help maintain or slow loss of bone mineral density. Older adults should have three servings of calcium-rich foods every day.9,15

- **Intake of the B vitamins** is very important. Vitamin B6 is necessary to the metabolism of protein and fat, and vitamin B12 is required for the process of cell division and central nervous system functioning. Older adults should be monitored if taking vitamin B supplements. Excess of vitamin B6 can result in toxic side effects leading to sensory neuropathy.9

**Assessment tip:** Older adults should not simply add vitamins to their diet. Any additions of vitamins, minerals or other supplements should be under the supervision of health care professionals. Fat-soluble vitamins, such as D, E, K and A are stored in the body and not excreted the way water-soluble vitamins are. Taking large amounts of fat-soluble vitamins could lead to toxic levels and adverse effects.9

Alcohol ingestion can have an impact on nutrition, especially for deficiencies of thiamin, riboflavin, foliate and vitamin B6 because alcohol can inhibit nutrient absorption, irritate the stomach and affect metabolism.9 In cases of significant alcohol use, alcohol may actually be ingested in place of or in preference to food, thus further compounding its negative effects.

In summary, nutritional assessment is critical to identifying problems and correcting them in the older adult. The nurse must evaluate nutritional status carefully, taking into consideration not only the types and quantities of food being ingested, but the social and economic factors that influence nutrition as well.

**Pharmacology assessment and the geriatric patient**

*Mrs. Burns is 80 years old. Her physician prescribed Benicar, 20 mg daily, for hypertension. During a routine checkup, her blood pressure was still significantly elevated. When questioned, Mrs. Burns admitted that she only takes the Benicar four times a week instead of daily. She says she does this to save money and to “make the pills last longer.”*

Mr. Lord is 70 years old, and has had epilepsy for many years and takes Dilantin to control his condition. He recently had a seizure, the first he has had in many years. During a thorough evaluation, it was discovered that Mr. Lord recently began to take ginseng, an herbal supplement, to “increase my energy. My daughter takes it and says it really helps her. I know it can’t hurt me because it’s ‘natural’ and not really medicine,” he said. What neither Mr. Lord nor his daughter realized is that ginseng and Dilantin interact, and that ginseng reduces the effectiveness of Dilantin.14,16

The preceding scenarios illustrate two common problems with medication adherence among the elderly. Financial concerns may cause an older adult to take less of his medication than prescribed in an attempt to, as Mrs. Burns says, “make the pills last longer.” Sometimes it may be difficult to make trips to the pharmacy, especially if the elder’s physical or mental health makes driving impossible. Seeking and obtaining transportation may be a problem.

Another issue that is impacting medication compliance with increasing frequency is that of adding herbs or other supplements to medication regimens without the knowledge or consent of health care providers. Many people believe that non-prescription agents such as aspirin, herbal supplements, vitamins and minerals are harmless and can be taken without medical supervision. They do not realize that these agents can interact with prescription drugs and cause adverse effects. They also fail to realize that these agents may be harmful by themselves as well.

When conducting a pharmacologic assessment of the older adult, start by determining what prescription medications they are taking.
Reconcile the list of medications, making sure you have the most current information. Find out how much the patient and, if appropriate, a family member knows about the patient’s medication regimen. Important questions to ask include:

- **What are the names of the medications you are taking?**
- **When do you take your medications?** Do you take your medications with food or something to drink? What kinds of food and drinks do you take with your medication?
- **What kinds of side effects may occur when you take your medicine?** If side effects take place, what do you do about them?
- **Do you have insurance that covers some of the cost of your medicine?** Do you ever have trouble affording the cost of your medicine?

You also need to find out about other medicines your patient is taking. You need to ask if he takes any medicine that the doctor has not prescribed, such as aspirin, allergy tablets, cold medication and so on. Explain that non-prescription drugs and prescription drugs can interact and cause harmful side effects. Emphasize that he should not take other medicines without his physician’s approval.

It is very important to ask if the patient is taking any herbal preparations, vitamins, minerals or dietary supplements (including weight-loss products or nutritional supplements). These agents can cause harmful interactions with each other, alone, and with prescription and non-prescription drugs.

**Assessment tip:** Provide simply written instructions about what medications the patient is taking, their actions, when and how to take them, common side effects and what to do if side effects occur. If necessary, a family member or friend should be involved to help the patient adhere to his medication regimen.

After determining what medications (including non-prescription, vitamins, herbs, minerals and so on) the patient takes, if he knows how and why to take them and the possibility of side effects, consider the physiological alterations in the body of the older adult that impact on medication effectiveness.

The body’s ability to metabolize drugs and use them most effectively decreases with age. Here are some aging body changes that influence the effectiveness of medication in the geriatric patient:

- **Body water content:** As the body ages, there is as much as a 15 percent decrease in water content and an increase in body fat. The extra fat means that the effects of fat-soluble drugs may be increased, and the reduction in water content means that water-soluble drugs exist in more concentrated amounts.
- **Liver functioning:** Hepatic (liver) blood flow, liver mass and liver metabolic activity may decrease with age. It is important that liver functioning be assessed if the patient is taking drugs that are metabolized by the liver or if taking drugs that have the potential to damage the liver.
- **Renal functioning:** Renal function also decreases with age, but this decrease varies considerably among older adults. Since the kidneys excrete most drugs, it is important to be aware of kidney functioning and remain alert to possible build-up of potentially toxic levels of drugs.
- **Gastric functioning:** Aging causes a decrease in gastric motility and gastrointestinal absorption surface. These factors may cause a decrease in or delayed absorption of acidic drugs.
- **Vision changes:** Age-related reduction in visual acuity may make it difficult for older adults to read drug labels, thereby increasing the risk for taking the wrong medication.

**Assessment tip:** Be sure to include socioeconomic factors when assessing pharmacology factors in elderly adults.

**Sexual Assessment**

Mr. Grimes, a 78-year-old retired construction supervisor, arrives at his physician’s office for a routine checkup. His blood pressure is unusually high, despite the fact that he was prescribed anti-hypertensives several months ago. When questioned, Mr. Grimes says he “only takes my blood pressure pills a couple times a week.” When asked why, he explains, “Since I’ve been taking those things, I can’t satisfy my wife. When I don’t take them too often, things are better.” Medication side effects can include sexual dysfunction. Such side effects must be discussed with patients at the time of prescription.

Sexuality and sexual functioning are life-long issues for all persons. Health care professionals sometimes forget or disbelieve that these issues are important to geriatric patients. Research shows that interest in sex and sexuality continues throughout the life span. Therefore, it is important that sexual assessment be part of the physical assessment of older adults.

First, be aware of changes in the reproductive tract that occur with aging. In men, sperm production and testosterone levels decrease. The time needed to become aroused and to ejaculate increases, and the refractory period lengthens. The firmness and force of ejaculation decreases.

Oral medications for erectile dysfunction, such as sildenafil (Viagra) and tadalafil (Cialis) are often able to compensate for normal age-related changes in the sexual functioning in men. In women, as estrogen levels decrease, the thickness, elasticity and lubrication of vaginal tissues decreases. These changes may cause intercourse to become painful. Women may avoid sexual intercourse due to such pain. The use of vaginal lubricants can help alleviate dryness and reduce discomfort.

Glandular tissue in the breasts decreases, and there is an increase in the amount of time it takes for arousal to occur. The vagina shortens, labia atrophy and the cervix may descend into the vagina, which causes discomfort. Orgasms may become less intense and less gratifying. Additionally, post-menopausal women generally return to pre-menopausal state more quickly than younger women.

In addition to normal age-related changes, cardiovascular disease, depression and diabetes have been associated with sexual dysfunction and/or a decrease in libido. Persons with these conditions should receive sexual counseling as necessary.

Nurses must also be aware of medications that may cause sexual dysfunction. These include certain types of antihypertensives, selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) used to treat depression, and beta blockers. When performing a pharmacologic as well as a sexual assessment, be sure to explain the potential for these types of side effects.

Sexual assessment requires that a nurse ask patients questions that are highly personal and intimate in nature. If a nurse is uncomfortable with such an assessment, she/he will most likely transmit this discomfort to the patient. The more confident and comfortable the nurse is with sexual assessment, the more at ease will be the patient.

The nurse must maintain an objective, non-judgmental attitude and conduct the assessment in a quiet, private area.

One framework that may be used when conducting a sexual assessment is the PLISSIT model. (To view an online video of a nurse demonstrating the use of the PLISSIT model visit [http://links.lww.com/A277].)

The first step in the model is P: To seek permission to begin the sexual assessment. Asking for permission helps to preserve the patient’s dignity and to allow him some control over the assessment process. You might begin by asking the patient, “Mr. Grimes, would it be all right if I asked you some questions about your sexual health?” After permission is obtained, you could proceed by asking, “What kinds of changes have you noticed in your sexual health since you began taking your heart medication?” Make the questions pertinent to your patient’s situation. If appropriate, you might ask the patient if he would like his sexual partner to take part in the discussion. Respect his response, whether it is “yes” or “no.”

The next step is to provide limited information (LI). For example, if specific medications are linked to the patient’s sexual difficulties, information about medication side effects could be provided. Other types of limited information might include discussing normal age-related changes in the reproductive system or the effects of certain diseases on sexual functioning.

Next, offer specific suggestions (SS). This means that you will offer specific suggestions
The stages of sleep can be described as stages and the REM (rapid eye movement) sleep. There are five recurring stages. Stages one through four comprise the period of non-REM sleep and last from 90 to 120 minutes. Each stage lasts from five to 15 minutes. REM sleep is characterized by rapid respiration, increased heart rate and blood pressure, increased brain activity, rapid eye movements and temporary paralysis of limbs. REM sleep is also referred to as dream sleep because dreaming takes place during this stage. It is believed that REM sleep is necessary for psychological restoration, learning, memory and concentration during the day. This stage occurs in cycles about every 90 to 120 minutes following the first four stages. The percentage of time spent in REM sleep is greatest during infancy and early childhood and decreases during adolescence and young adulthood with greater increases occurring in old age.

Sleep assessment in the older adult
A common mistaken belief is that the need for sleep decreases with age. In fact, the elderly adult needs about the same amount of sleep as he did as a young person and in middle age. The majority of older adults need between six and 10 hours of sleep each night. Research shows that less than four or more than eight hours of sleep is associated with mortality rates that are higher than those of persons sleeping eight hours.

When asking the older adult about his sleep patterns, try to avoid “yes” and “no” questions, because these usually do not elicit enough helpful information. For example, if you ask, “Do you have trouble sleeping?” many older adults will simply say “no.” Here are some suggestions for phrasing questions when assessing sleep patterns.

- “What time do you usually go to bed?”
- “What time do you usually get up?” The answers to these questions will give you an idea whether the patient goes to bed and gets up at about the same time each day. A regular bedtime and awakening time is associated with better sleep patterns.
- “How many times do you wake up during the night?” “What causes you to get up?” This is better than asking the patient whether he sleeps through the night. It requires the older adult to think about his answer. He may assume it’s normal to wake up frequently during the night. If he does, this may indicate a health problem.
- “How many times do you wake up to go to the bathroom during the night?” The answer to this question can indicate various problems, such as incontinence, enlarged prostate in men or anxiety.
- “What kinds of things help you to sleep at night?” “What kinds of things prevent you from sleeping at night?” The answers to these questions may provide you with clues to specific physical or mental health problems. For example, a patient may tell you that some nights he wakes up gasping for air or coughing, indicating a possible cardiovascular or nervous system problem.

The preceding questions are a good baseline for questioning older patients about their sleep. Become familiar with some of the more common sleep problems and how they impact the elderly patient’s ability to obtain a good night’s sleep. It is estimated that about 5 million older adults in the United States have a serious sleep disorder. Some of the more common problems include the following issues:

- **Anxiety and depression.** These issues can interfere with a person’s ability to fall asleep and/or stay asleep.
- **Substance abuse.** Abuse of alcohol, prescription drugs and/or illegal drugs can profoundly disrupt a person’s sleep patterns.
- **Excessive intake of caffeine.** Excessive intake of caffeine, especially in the evening, can prevent a person from falling asleep or staying asleep.
- **Pain.** Older adults may deal with chronic pain issues. Pain may be due to arthrits, cancer, nervous system disorders, and so on. Elderly patients who are in physical discomfort take longer to fall asleep, stay asleep or find a comfortable sleeping position.
- **Cardiovascular disease and respiratory disease.** These types of diseases may cause orthopnea and shortness of breath. Asking the patient “How many pillows do you sleep on at night?” gives you an indication that he needs to sit up or be propped up to sleep without having difficulty breathing.
- **Dementia.** Older persons with dementia experience more sleep problems than other older persons. Sleep is often fragmented, and nighttime wandering may occur.
- **Urinary issues.** Frequency, nocturia and urgency commonly occur in older adults and increase with age. Older men may experience benign prostatic hypertrophy, which prevents the bladder from emptying completely and often causes the sensation of constantly feeling the urge to void. These issues are compounded by the decreased bladder capacity of the elderly.
- **Sleep apnea.** Sleep apnea is an intermittent, temporary pause in breathing during sleep. This can occur many times throughout the night and lasts about 10 seconds each time it occurs. These interruptions in breathing can lead to hypoxia. Research shows that older adults who suffer from these kinds of hypoxic episodes are more likely to experience sudden death, stroke, angina and exacerbating hypertension. Patients and their sleeping partners should be questioned about the occurrence of the signs and symptoms.
of sleep apnea, which include heavy, loud snoring; choking, coughing or struggling to breathe while sleeping; extreme sleepiness during the day, headaches in the morning and trouble concentrating. A number of medications can interfere with sleep patterns. When providing pharmacology patient education as well as assessing sleep and rest, be sure to familiarize yourself with medications that may disturb a patient’s sleep. Some drugs commonly associated with sleep interference include decongestants, antihistamines, beta-blockers and beta-agonists.3,14

Assessment tip: Some antidepressants, such as Elavil and Sinequan, can have sedating effects and should be taken in the evening. But antidepressants such as Zoloft and Paxil have stimulating effects and should be taken in the morning.3

Pain assessment
Pain assessment should be part of the assessment of all geriatric patients. Older adults often live with chronic illnesses and disorders that cause varying degrees of pain. They may also experience more acute types of pain that follow trauma or surgery.

Research shows that about 25 percent-50 percent of older adults who live in the community suffer from some type of pain. That percentage increases to 45 percent-80 percent for older adults who live in long-term care facilities. Research also indicates that older adults are often undertreated for both acute and chronic pain, and some live with untreated pain every day of their lives.9

Why is pain undertreated? Some reasons include:

Some health care professionals may be unaware of the prevalence of pain in the older population or may think that some degree of pain is “normal” in the geriatric population. Failure of older adults to report pain. They may believe that pain is a “normal” part of the aging process and that nothing can be done to alleviate it. Some older adults may believe that taking pain medication is a sign of weakness or are afraid of becoming dependent on pain relief medications.

It is difficult to assess pain in patients who have difficulty communicating, such as those persons suffering from various forms of dementia or following a disorder that affects communication, such as stroke.

Assessment tip: Some older adults may not believe that they have pain, but may admit to discomfort or other unpleasant sensations. When assessing for pain, do not only ask a patient, “Do you have any pain?” Also ask whether they have any discomfort, aching or soreness.

Pain may be either chronic or acute. Acute pain is due to surgery, medical procedures, injury or trauma. It is often self-limiting with appropriate treatment of the underlying cause. However, some acute pain may become chronic. For example, a back injury may initially cause acute pain, but damage may be severe enough to cause lingering effects.

Chronic pain is “ongoing” pain that is treated but not self-limiting. It may be related to disease processes such as cancer, neurological disorders, degenerative diseases, arthritis, osteoporosis and vascular disease. Older adults (or any adult for that matter) who suffer from chronic pain need a thorough pain treatment plan that not only addresses pain relief but the social and emotional consequences of living with such pain as well.

Assessment tip: Persons living with chronic pain should also be assessed for depression. Chronic pain can limit mobility, social interaction, interfere with performance of activities of daily living and interfere with sleep and rest.9

There are a number of pain assessment techniques in use. Some require the use of numeric pain rating scales while others rely on pictures that illustrate various degrees of pain. Important issues for the nurse to address when conducting a pain assessment include the following:

- Ask the patient to describe the pain, aching, or soreness he is experiencing. For example is the pain sharp or dull? Is it constant or intermittent? Is it burning or “squeezing?” Does it cause any lack of sensation? Does it cause tingling, numbness, or “pins and needles” feelings? Does the pain stay in one spot or does it radiate?
- When does the pain occur? Is it worse at specific times during the day or at night? If so, what is the patient doing or what is happening in his environment when the pain becomes worse?
- What makes the pain better or less uncomfortable?
- What makes the pain feel worse?
- Are there any other symptoms that occur with the pain, such as nausea or vomiting?
- Does the patient take any medications for his pain? What are they and how often does he take them? How well do these medications work to control your pain? Be sure to ask about ALL medications including prescription, over-the-counter, herbal preparations, minerals, vitamins and other supplements. Remember that some patients don’t consider items such as herbal preparations, minerals, vitamins and over-the-counter drugs as “medicine.” Are the medications causing any side effects?
- Does the patient do anything specific to alleviate his pain (in addition to medication)? Some patients may drink alcohol or take other drugs (including illegal drugs) to relieve pain. Others may use remedies such as warm milk to induce sleep, relaxation tapes, meditation or prayer. How successful are these interventions?
- What does pain mean to the patient from his cultural and/or religious viewpoint? For example, some patients may believe that pain is punishment for misdeeds. Some cultures value stoicism when confronting pain while others are quite emotionally vocal about expressing pain. Remember to remain objective and respectful of a patient’s cultural and religious beliefs about pain and how it is dealt with.

Many patients may be able to participate in completing pain assessment scales. A numeric pain rating scale generally consists of a scale of 0-10 with 0 indicating no pain and 10 indicating the worst possible pain. The degree of pain worsens as the numbers increase.9 This type of scale requires that the patient be able to understand your explanation of the scale, correlate his pain to a numeric value, and communicate this correlation to you.

A verbal descriptor scale is one that requires the patient to describe his pain from “no pain,” to “mild,” “moderate,” “severe,” or “as bad as the pain could be.” This requires that the patient be able to understand the descriptive terms used and be able to correlate the terms with his pain, and describe his pain using the given terms without the benefit of visual cues.

A pictorial scale such as the Faces Pain Scale requires that the patient select a visual depiction of pain. For example, the patient is asked to look at a number of different faces that range from a face with an expression of calm or contentment to faces that look increasingly uncomfortable. The patient chooses the face with the expression that best “fits” his current pain experience.9 This scale does not require the patient to express himself using specific descriptive terms or to understand specific descriptive terms.

Assessment tip: A family member, friend or reliable caretaker should be involved in the pain assessment if patients are unable or reluctant to communicate their pain experience.

But what about patients who are unable to understand verbal or visual communications, such as the patient suffering from dementia? Researchers are working to develop valid and reliable pain assessment tools for use with patients suffering from dementia. One such tool is the Pain Assessment in Advanced Dementia (PAINAD) scale, which relies on direct observation of five behavioral indicators of pain.2

An overview of the five behaviors used to assess pain includes:

- Breathing (does not include mechanical ventilation): Ranges from a score of 0 for normal breathing, a score of 1 for occasional labored breathing or short periods of hyperventilation, to a maximum score of 2 for noisy, labored breathing and prolonged periods of hyperventilation.
- Negative vocalization: Ranges from a score of 0 for none, a score of 1 for occasional moaning or groaning, to a maximum score of 2 for loud moaning or groaning, crying, or calling out.
- Facial expressions: Ranges from a score of 0 for no expression or an expression of calm or smiling, a score of 1 for frowning or...
expressions of sadness, to a maximum score of 2 for facial grimacing, frowning, scowling, etc.

- **Body language:** Ranges from a score of 0 for a relaxed body posture, a score of 1 for tenseness, fidgeting, or, if ambulatory, distressed pacing, to a maximum score of 2 for rigid body posture, clenched fists, pushing or striking out, and/or pulling knees up towards chest.

- **Consolability:** Ranges from a score of 0 for needing no consolation, a score of 1 to the need for reassurance by touch or tone of voice, to a maximum score of 2 for being inconsolable.

Scores for each category are totaled with scores ranging from a minimum total of 0 to a maximum total of 10. The higher the total number, the more severe the pain. The Harford Institute for Geriatric Nursing Web site offers a detailed explanation of the scale and may be accessed at www.ConsultGeriRn.org. Specific information about the use of the scale may also be found in the publications of the American Medical Directors Association.¹⁸

A comprehensive pain management treatment plan is important for anyone dealing with pain. A number of complementary and alternative therapies are being used with increasing frequency. These include acupuncture, herbal supplements, massage therapy, chiropractic care, Yoga, meditation, relaxation therapy, biofeedback, and, in some cases where not prohibited, exercise. Any and all complementary and alternative therapies should be initiated and maintained only under the supervision of the patient’s primary health care provider.

Most patients dealing with pain participate in some type of medication regimen. Be aware of and help the patient and family prepare for and deal with some common side effects of analgesics.

- Some analgesics, particularly opioid analgesics, slow the intestinal tract and can lead to constipation. Stool softeners, adequate fluid intake, and fruit and vegetable intake should help to alleviate the problem of constipation.⁹,¹⁴

- Nausea and vomiting are also fairly common side effects, and an antiemetic may be prescribed for these types of adverse occurrences. Some analgesics cause drowsiness and sedation, and patients should be cautioned against activities that require alertness. In severe pain, morphine may be administered, and pruritis is often associated with its administration. Antihistamines are effective in combating pruritis, but may also cause sedation as a side effect.⁹,¹⁴

In summary, a thorough pain assessment must be conducted as part of a thorough geriatric assessment. Remember that pain is often undertreated in this population, particularly in those elderly adults who cannot or will not communicate about their pain. Patients with dementia are at significant risk for having their pain undertreated.

Involve family, friends and caretakers as part of the pain assessment process as well as its treatment. Many of these individuals (including the patients themselves as well as some health care professionals) may hold the mistaken belief that pain is simply part of the aging process and must, to some degree, be tolerated. Help to educate all of these individuals, including colleagues, about the need for adequate assessment and treatment of pain.

Remain alert to the complications of undertreating pain, including depression and social isolation. Also be sure to monitor and to teach the patient about the side effects of medications used to alleviate pain and how to reduce or eliminate such adverse occurrences.

Use a variety of pain assessment techniques including verbal discussion and the use of valid and reliable pain assessment tools. Remain sensitive to the issue of culture and religion and how they influence the expression of pain and compliance with treatment options.

Finally, remember to involve the patient, family and caregivers in pain assessment and management. Often the key to success in managing pain is the cooperation of the patient and of those with whom he is most involved.

**Assessing mental health**

Mental health and well-being is as important to the older adult as it is to any other population. Unfortunately, some mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety, may be overlooked in elderly adults. The signs and symptoms of these and other mental health problems may be mistakenly attributed to the aging process or dementia, and as a result, a thorough assessment is not done. In fact, only about half of older adults with mental health problems actually receive appropriate mental health services.¹⁹

**Assessment tip:** When assessing mental health, be sure to evaluate the patient for mental disturbances related to medication side effects. Sometimes adverse occurrences are related to alterations in mental status.

Some health care professionals may hold the mistaken belief that older adults suffer from mental health problems more than younger adults. Actually, older adults demonstrate fewer diagnosable psychiatric disorders than younger persons with the exception of cognitive problems such as Alzheimer’s disease, which show age-related increases.⁶ Some experts bemoan the fact that many health care professionals are more concerned about a broken bone than a “broken spirit.”¹⁷

The geriatric population can experience a number of mental health problems, just as younger persons do. Although some problems may develop in old age, others may have begun earlier in life (e.g. depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder). Let’s look at the normal aging changes that influence mental health and cognition and review some mental health and cognition problems and how they can be identified in the older adult.

**Normal age-related changes in mental health and cognition**

An older adult’s mental health and cognition stay comparatively stable. The alterations that do take place are usually not dramatic enough to cause major problems with activities of daily living. Serious changes and abrupt loss of cognition usually indicate a physical or mental disorder such as Alzheimer’s disease or stroke.⁸ Some normal age-related changes in mental health and cognition include the following.⁹

- The speed with which information is processed decreases with age. This means that older adults take a longer time to learn new information and require that information be repeated.

- The ability to deal with multiple tasks slows.

- The capability with which the older adult can maintain attention and ignore unimportant information decreases with age.

- The use of language is maintained, but word finding and naming ability decreases with age.

- The ability to use abstract thought and demonstrate mental flexibility are associated with some decline as a person ages.

- The ability to acquire practical experience and wisdom continues until the end of life.

**Grief and bereavement**

Geriatric patients generally must deal with the loss of loved ones, including spouses, siblings, parents and others. Grief is considered to be a normal response to such losses within a two-year period. Grief that lasts longer than two years is considered to be pathological. However, the length of grief varies with cultural norms. The American Psychological Association’s standard of care concerning grief in the older adult encourages the health care professional not to focus on time, but on the way grief is presented. Profound depression, extensive guilt, overwhelming senses of loss, preoccupation with death, difficulty performing activities of daily living and social incapacitation indicate pathological grief and require medical intervention.⁹

**Depression**

While the prevalence of major depression declines with age, symptoms of depression increase. Eight to 20 percent of older adults living in the community and up to 37 percent in primary care settings experience depressive symptoms.¹⁹ Depressive symptoms are often associated with chronic illness and pain.⁹

Older adults suffering from depression often report numerous somatic complaints, including chronic pain. They may not consider themselves depressed and focus on physical rather than mental symptoms.⁹

**Assessment tip:** Older people may feel that it is a sign of weakness to report feelings of depression. They may believe it is more “acceptable” to have...
a physical illness, thus the focus on physical complaints. Your first clue to depression in older adults may be the reporting of somatic complaints.

A number of tools for the assessment of geriatric depression are available. One such tool is the Geriatric Depression Scale, which consists of 30 questions (a shortened 15-question version may also be used) that can be answered with “yes” or “no.”9 Examples of questions include:

- Are you basically satisfied with your life?
- Do you feel full of energy?
- Do you feel happy most of the time?
- Do you think that most people are better off than you are?

Criteria for major depression as noted in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV-TR20 include:

- Depressed mood or loss of interest or feelings of loss of pleasure.
- Symptoms must last for at least two consecutive weeks and indicate a change from previous mood and functioning.
- At least five of the following: depressed mood, changes in sleep patterns, reduced feelings of interest or pleasure, feelings of guilt or worthlessness, loss of energy or fatigue, inability to concentrate, changes in weight or appetite, psychomotor agitation or retardation, and suicidal thoughts.

The incidence of depression is twice as high in older women than in older men. Some of the possible reasons for this difference is that older women are more likely to experience loneliness, financial problems and a reduction in independence cause by functional disabilities.9

Assessment tip: Depression is a major risk factor for suicide. Adults age 65 and older have the highest suicide rates of all age groups. Suicide is highest among caucasians, followed by Asians, Hispanics and non-Hispanic blacks. Older adults suffering from alcoholism have a greater risk for suicide as well. Nurses must not only assess for depression but for suicidal ideation.9

When evaluating elderly patients for depression, be sure to check on the potential for depressive side effects of certain medications. Medications that can cause depression include:21

- Antihypertensives, such as reserpine.
- Hormonal replacement therapy, including estrogen and progesterone.
- Cardiac agents, such as digitalis.
- Analgesics, such as codeine.
- Anti-anxiety agents, including diazepam.

Dementia

Dementia is a syndrome that leads to a decline in multiple cognitive abilities. The presenting signs and symptoms range from mild cognitive impairment to complete incapacitation. Dementia is both chronic and terminal, because the syndrome progresses to causing the patient to become completely dependent in all aspects of activities of daily living. There is no consistent course, and the rapidity with which the disease will progress cannot be predicted.9

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Psychiatric Disorders – Text Revision (4th edition20), the diagnostic criteria must include both a decline in memory and at least one of the following:

- The ability to understand spoken or written language and to generate understandable speech.
- The ability to recognize or identify objects (assuming such ability is not impaired by other disease processes).
- The ability to perform motor activities (assuming such activities are not impaired by other disease processes).
- The ability to think abstractly, make appropriate judgments, and plan and execute complex tasks.
- The decline in cognitive ability must be of a severity to interfere with normal activities of daily living.

There are a number of types of dementia, with the most common being Alzheimer’s disease (AD). It is responsible for about 50 percent to 70 percent of cases and has a subtle onset. The exact etiology of AD is unknown, but researchers believe that genetic and environmental components may play a role in its development.9

There are three stages of dementia: mild, moderate, and severe. Six aspects of cognition are evaluated to determine staging. These six aspects are memory, orientation, judgment and problem solving, community affairs, home and hobbies, and personal care. Diagnosis is based on assessment of these aspects because there is not a definitive diagnostic study or studies that can confirm diagnosis.9

Treatment is aimed at slowing the progression of the dementia and improving cognitive function. Medications such as Namenda and Exelon are currently used to treat cognitive impairment. Alternative therapies, such as ingestion of ginkgo biloba and various vitamins and minerals, are under investigation.9

Assessing for elder abuse

Mrs. Dash is an 80-year-old female who lives with her daughter, son-in-law and three grandchildren. She was recently hospitalized for a total hip replacement and infection of the surgical wound. After discharge, she returned to her daughter’s home. A visiting nurse arrives this morning to assess Mrs. Dash’s wound and perform a dressing change. Mrs. Dash lives in a self-contained apartment attached to the main house via a short hallway. Her daughter provides Mrs. Dash with housecleaning services and brings her meals three times a day. Mrs. Dash’s apartment is spotlessly clean. Mrs. Dash is dressed in a clean housedress, and is wearing make-up and jewelry. She does not make eye contact with the visiting nurse and has a sad expression on her face. Her daughter is present and interacts with the visiting nurse, asking if her mother is “healing.” She does not interact with Mrs. Dash. One of the grandchildren stops in to ask for a ride to a sports event. The grandchild does not interact with Mrs. Dash, but rolls her eyes and mutters something about “that old woman is more trouble than it’s worth.” Mrs. Dash’s daughter prepares to leave and casually says, “So long, Mom,” and leaves without looking back. Mrs. Dash looks at the visiting nurse and says sadly, “They take care of me, but no one really cares about me. There is no love. They don’t like me.” Mrs. Dash is suffering from emotional neglect, sometimes characterized as a form of elder abuse.

When nurses hear the term “elder abuse,” they often picture an older adult who is bruised, in poor physical condition and may be dressed in dirty clothing. But there are many forms of abuse, not all of them readily apparent. Elder abuse can take place in any setting: the patient’s home, an acute-care hospital or long-term care facility. It occurs among all socioeconomic groups. As nurses, we must be aware of the various types of abuse and how to protect the elderly adult from the effects of abuse.

Physical abuse

Physical abuse is defined as the use of physical force to intentionally inflict physical injury or pain. Actions such as hitting, pushing or shaking are forms of physical abuse.9

Signs of physical abuse include bruising, fractures, abrasions, lacerations and cuts. But it can be difficult to distinguish accidental injury from physical abuse. The elderly adult’s skin contains only small amounts of subcutaneous fat, and blood vessels are thin and fragile.22 This makes the older person susceptible to accidental bruising, which can be difficult to distinguish from physical abuse. However, research shows that 90 percent of accidental bruising occurs on the extremities. Accidental bruises rarely, if ever, occur on the neck, ears, genitals, buttocks or soles of the feet.22

Low bone density and the existence of osteoporosis place the elderly at high risk for fractures. To date, no particular pattern of abuse fractures has been identified.22 The location, frequency and health history of the older adult with fractures must be evaluated to identify suspected abuse.

When evaluating abrasions, lacerations and cuts, it is important to describe them accurately. Many nurses refer to any wound as a laceration. When documenting these kinds of trauma, it is important to be accurate.22

- Abrasion: A scraping injury that can occur if the older is pulled or dragged across a surface (e.g. a carpet) that abrades the skin.22
- Laceration: Full-thickness splitting open of the skin with ragged edges that occurs when the individual is traumatized by blunt force.22
- Cut: An incision made by a sharp object that has smooth, clean edges.22

Sexual abuse

Sexual abuse is defined as any type of nonconsensual sexual intimacy.9 Examples
include rape, molestation, sexual harassment, unwanted touching, sodomy, coerced nudity and nonconsensual explicit sexual photography. Signs and symptoms of sexual abuse include,9,22

- Bruises around the genital area and/or breasts.
- Unexplained vaginal or anal bleeding.
- Unexplained occurrence of venereal disease or genital infections.
- Torn, stained or bloody undergarments.
- Elder’s verbal report of sexual abuse.

**Emotional or psychological abuse**

Emotional or psychological abuse is defined as infliction of distress, anguish or sadness via verbal and/or non-verbal acts.9 Examples of elder emotional or psychological abuse include yelling, threatening, swearing, name calling, insults, intimidation and humiliation. Other forms of emotional abuse include isolating the older adult from family and friends, preventing him from pursuing his regular social activities (e.g. attending church, visiting a senior citizen’s center), isolating him from others in the home, and/or giving the older adult the “silent treatment” and not providing any affection.23

Signs and symptoms of emotional or psychological abuse include sadness, emotional upset or agitation, withdrawal and verbal reporting of emotional abusive behaviors.9,22,23

**Neglect**

Neglect is defined as the failure to fulfill or refusal to fulfill obligations to an elder such as safety, shelter, affection, food, water, clothing, hygiene, medicine or comfort.9,22,23 Neglect may be on the part of a spouse, family member, friend or caregiver. Additionally, the elderly adult may also initiate self-neglect, which occurs when the elder himself disregards such needs as hygiene, food, safety and so on, because of mental or physical impairments or because he chooses not to take care of himself.9,22,23

Signs and symptoms of neglect include malnutrition, dehydration, poor personal hygiene, untreated health problems, unsanitary or unsafe living conditions, history of being left alone or choosing to be alone, and reports of being neglected.9,22,23

**Abandonment**

Abandonment is the desertion of an elderly person by someone who is responsible for providing care to the elder or who has physical custody of the elder.9,23 In such cases, the elder is simply deserted or abandoned at a hospital (e.g. emergency department), long-term care facility, shopping center or other public location.9 In addition to being abandoned, the elderly adult may also exhibit signs and symptoms of other types of abuse.

**Financial or material abuse**

Financial or material abuse is defined as illegal or improper use of an older adult’s money, property or other assets. The person committing this abuse does so for personal or monetary gain or benefit.9 Examples of this type of abuse include unexplained disappearance of personal items, unusual withdrawals of money from savings or checking accounts, or changes in property ownership. As a result of financial losses, elders may not be able to pay bills or buy food and medicine.

**Risk factors for elder abuse**

Elder abuse can occur within all socioeconomic, cultural and intellectual groups. However, research shows that certain characteristics surface most commonly among abuse victims. These include,9,23

- **Sex**: Women are more likely to be victims of elder abuse than men.
- **Age**: Victims of elder abuse are likely to be more than 75 years of age.
- **History of violence**: Victims of elder abuse are more likely to be prior victims of abuse, such as child abuse or spousal or intimate partner abuse. If the elder abuse victim was himself an abuser (e.g. abused his children), he is more likely to be a victim of elder abuse committed by those he abused in the past.
- **Functional status**: Elders whose physical and/or mental status is impaired are more likely to be abused.
- **Poor social network**: Elders who have fewer than three significant others are more likely to suffer abuse.
- **Economic status**: Elders who are poor are more likely to be abused.
- **Education**: Older adults who have less than an eighth-grade education are more likely to be abused.
- **Minorities**: Members of minority groups have statistically higher rates of elder abuse.

**Characteristics of abusers**

Some common characteristics of abusers include the following.9,23

- **Sex**: Abusers are more likely to be men.
- **Substance abuse**: Abusers are more likely to have a history of substance abuse, including alcohol abuse.
- **Mental health**: Abusers are more likely to suffer from mental illness.
- **Family status**: Elders are more likely to be abused by members of their own families.
- **Social network**: Abusers have a poor social network and are more likely to be dependent on the elder for financial or shelter or other needs.
- **Caregiver stress**: Caregivers who are overwhelmed by the burden of caring for the older adult may end up abusing the person for whom they are caring.
- **Cycle of family violence**: Caregivers may have been abused by the elder they are now abusing.

**Screening for elder abuse**

Evaluate signs and symptoms that may indicate abuse. Monitor those who provide care for elderly adults. Do they show signs and symptoms of stress and difficulty coping? Is there a history of abuse in the elder or caregiver’s family?

There are a number of elder assessment screening tools available for use. The Hartford Institute for Geriatric Nursing recommends the Elder Assessment Instrument (EAI) as a screening tool in the clinical setting.9 This is a 40-item tool used to determine whether the elderly patient needs to be referred for suspected elder abuse.9

Elders are often reluctant to report abuse. They may be afraid of retaliation by the abuser. They may believe that they have done something to deserve the abuse or feel guilty about being an abuser themselves at some point in their lives. Abused elders may also be reluctant to report abuse if they are dependent on the abuser for care, shelter or financial help.

**Assessment tip**: The elder and the suspected abuser should be interviewed separately. This may reveal inconsistencies in reported histories or explanations of signs and symptoms of abuse. If the suspected abuser refuses to allow separate interviews, the suspicion of abuse increases.9

Nurses must be aware of local elder abuse/mistreatment reporting laws. Many states have mandatory reporting laws, and health care professionals must report suspected cases of elder abuse.9 Know your organization’s policies and procedures regarding the reporting of elder abuse, and familiarize yourself with contact information for local departments on aging and adult protective services. For state reporting numbers, visit the National Center on Elder Abuse Web site at www.nceaa.aoa.gov or call the Eldercare Locator at 1-800-677-1116.

**Assessment tip**: You don’t need to prove that abuse is occurring. You do need to report your suspicions. The experts in abuse will follow up to investigate your suspicions.

**Overview of assessment of body systems**

Basic physical assessment techniques, such as inspection, palpation and percussion, are similar for all age groups. This overview of the assessment of body systems focuses on those issues that are particular to the geriatric population.

**Vision, hearing and touch**

**Vision**

The first step in assessing the vision of an older adult is observation. Elderly persons who have stained clothing, poorly combed hair or excessive or poorly applied makeup may have vision impairment.9 A Snellen chart may be used to assess visual acuity, or you may ask the patient to read from a newspaper or other printed material with various size prints.

**Assessment tip**: Be sure that the patient is wearing his glasses or contact lens when assessing vision. Assess vision with and without corrective lenses. It is estimated that 92 percent of persons over 70 wear glasses, 18 percent also use a magnifying glass for close work, and 14 percent of persons 70-74 have difficulty seeing even with corrective lenses. Thirty-two percent of persons over 85 have trouble seeing even with corrective lenses.9
There are a number of normal age-related changes pertaining to the appearance of the eye and vision. These include the following issues.9,10

- The eyebrows gray and thin, as do the eyelashes. Skin around the eye wrinkles as subcutaneous tissue atrophies. Orbital fat decreases, giving the eyes a sunken appearance, and eyelids sag.
- The eye becomes less sensitive to feelings of pain and discomfort. This can cause the patient to be unaware of infections or injuries to the eye.
- The lenses thicken and harden, which reduces accommodation and brings a decrease in near-vision (presbyopia). The lens begins to appear “yellowish” and rather opaque. Visual acuity starts to decrease starting about the age of 50. This decrease becomes more rapid after the age of 70.
- The eye begins to lose its ability to adapt to changing degrees of light. Thus, as the adult ages, he needs more light to see objects in shadow or in dim light.
- The eye’s ability to adapt to a darkened room decreases with age. It takes more time for the eye to accommodate to darkness.
- The elder’s pupils become sluggish as the pupils decrease in size and become less responsive with age.

Assessment tip: As always, include medication evaluation as part of your assessment. Some drugs, such as Tamoxifen and thiazide diuretics, can interfere with vision.9,14

There are several visual problems that are commonly seen in the older adult. Nurses must be aware of these problems and their signs and symptoms so that appropriate referrals may be made.

- Cataracts: Cataracts are the most common causes of correctable vision loss.24 A cataract is an opacity of the lens that develops gradually without pain. It decreases the amount of light able to reach the retina, thus inhibiting vision. The patient experiences painless, gradual blurring and loss of vision; may see halos around objects; and have difficulty distinguishing colors. The pupil of the eye appears hazy. Cataracts are the leading cause of blindness in the world. Surgery is the treatment of choice, and prognosis is usually good. Risk factors include increased age, diabetes, eye trauma, long-term use of corticosteroid medications, smoking and alcohol use, and Caucasian race.4,9,24
- Glaucoma: This is a group of disorders characterized by an increase in intraocular pressure (IOP) that can damage the optic nerve. Untreated glaucoma can lead to peripheral vision loss and blindness. Its onset can be slow and insidious (chronic open-angle glaucoma) or abrupt (angle-closure glaucoma), which is a medical emergency. Treatment includes medications and/or laser therapy. Risk factors include IOP; being older than 60 years of age; a family history of the disease; personal history of hypertension, diabetes, myopia, or migraines; and African-American ancestry.4,9,24
- Age-related macular degeneration (ARMD): ARMD is the leading cause of blindness in persons over the age of 65. It is the atrophy of the macular region of the retina. The dry form of ARMD is characterized by retinal pigment degeneration and is slow and progressive and associated with a mild vision loss. The wet form involves the leakage of blood or serum from blood vessels beneath the retina. It is not as common as the dry form but is responsible for the majority of severe vision loss associated with ARMD. The primary symptom is a change in central vision, such as distortion of straight lines or bland areas that appear in the center of printed pages. There is no treatment for the dry form, but the wet form may be treated with laser treatments or injections.4,9,24
- Diabetic retinopathy: This is a microvascular disease of the eye associated with diabetes. The ocular microvascular system is damaged, and transport of oxygen and nutrients to the eye is inhibited. Patients experience a gradual vision loss. Treatment consists of laser therapy.9

Hearing

Hearing loss is quite common in the elderly patient. It is estimated that more than 30 percent of older persons between 65 and 74 have some degree of hearing loss. This percentage increases to 66 percent in persons over 75. In addition to age, risk factors for hearing loss include smoking, history of middle ear infections, tumors, the buildup of ear wax and long-term exposure to loud noises.9,4,24

Normal aging changes that influence hearing include:9

- The skin of the external ear wrinkles and sags.
- Cerumen is drier and harder and tends to accumulate in the ear more than in younger adults.
- Loss of nerves and sensory organs associated with hearing.

Assessment tip: When assessing hearing, be sure to assess for the presence of excessive ear wax, which may hinder hearing.

Hearing is assessed in the same ways as with other adult age groups. The use of a tuning fork and covering one ear and whispering two-syllable words toward the uncovered ear are two of the ways to assess hearing.

Assessment tip: As with all assessment evaluations, be sure to review the patient’s medications to determine whether any of them may affect hearing.

Tinnitus is a common problem in older adults. It is a ringing sound in the ear and can happen with or without accompanying hearing loss. The problem may be self-limiting or chronic. Tricyclic antidepressants may be prescribed as part of the treatment as well as relaxation techniques, biofeedback and counseling to deal with the discomfort.9

Touch

The sense of touch or physical sensation decreases with age. This is because nerve impulses are conducted at a slower rate in the elderly. There is also a reduction in the function of peripheral nerves. Medications used to calm or sedate may also contribute to a decrease in the sense of touch.9

These physiological changes lead to a decreased ability to perceive pain and temperature, which, in turn, can increase the risk for injury. For example, the older adult may not perceive the temperature of water in the bathtub or shower to be too hot, increasing the risk for burns. If the sense of pain is diminished, the elderly patient may not be aware that he has injured himself after falling or other types of blunt trauma.

The sense of touch is also important in conveying affection, and in some cultures, to communication in general. A loss of physical sensation may be detrimental emotionally as well as physically.

Assessment tip: Some diseases, such as diabetes mellitus, can cause peripheral neuropathies that add to the loss of the sensation of touch.9

One of the simplest ways to assess touch is to use a wisp of cotton. Patients close their eyes and are asked to indicate when they feel the sensation of touch. The nurse touches parts of the body, such as the face, the arms, the legs and the back. Additional techniques are to touch various areas of the body with a pin alternating with a wisp of cotton. The patient is asked to say whether he feels a sharp sensation (when touched with a pin) or dull (with the cotton wisp).9,24

Some nurses find it helpful to use objects of various sensations, such as sand paper, a piece of silk or fur and ask the patient if he feels a rough or a soft sensation. Tubes of hot and cold water may be placed against the patient’s skin as he is asked to state whether he feels a cold or a hot object.9,24

Assessment tip: Teach older adults to examine their skin, especially over bony prominences, the soles of their feet and between fingers and toes for open or broken areas of skin. Because of the decrease in the sensation of touch, open areas may not be noticed until they are severe and/or infected.

The integumentary system

The integument, or the skin, is the body’s largest organ and consists of three layers: the epidermis, the dermis and subcutaneous layers. The epidermis is the outermost layer of the skin and has up to five layers (depending on the specific part of the body). The dermis is the second layer of the skin, is made up of connective tissue, has an abundant blood supply, and lymph and neurosensory receptors. It supports and nourishes the dermis. The subcutaneous layer lies below the dermis, attaches to muscles and gives shape
to the body and provides a protective cushion for bones and internal organs. There are also a number of accessory structures that are part of the integumentary system. These are the hair, nails, sebaceous glands (which produce sebum for skin lubrication) and eccrine glands that produce sweat.49

The skin is very important to health and wellness. It is responsible for:
- Regulation of body temperature.
- Regulation of body fluids.
- Provision of a barrier to infection and promotion of the immune system.
- Production of vitamin D synthesis.
- Provision of sensory reception.

There are a number of age-related changes that affect how the integumentary system functions. Nurses need to be aware of these changes not only for their impact on physical health, but on self-perception and self-esteem as well.

- **Thickness and elasticity**: Both decrease with age, which leads to the appearance of wrinkles and causes the skin to sag, especially the skin of the face, neck and upper arms. Smoking is associated with an increase in wrinkling of the skin.

- **The epidermis**: The epidermis thins, and moisture is lost. The skin begins to have a dry and rough appearance. The rate of cell growth is decreased, which leads to an increased risk for infection. This decrease combined with a lack of moisture makes the skin more susceptible to damage. Liver or “age” spots appear and the number of moles and freckles may increase. The cosmetic aspects of these changes may have a negative impact on the older adult’s self-image and self-esteem.

- **The dermis**: Beginning in a person’s 30s, the dermis begins to decrease in thickness and effectiveness. The connective tissue decreases in function, which causes a loss of skin turgor that progresses with age. The capillaries thin, which leads to bruising. There is an accompanying reduction in sensation that increases the risk for injuries such as burns, infections and pressure sores.

- **Subcutaneous layer of skin**: This layer increases in some parts of the body and decreases in others, resulting in changes in fat distribution. It thins in the face, neck, hands and lower legs. With age, fat distribution becomes more pronounced in the abdomen and thighs in women, and in the abdomen in men.

- **Hair and nails**: The color of the hair becomes gray or white and becomes thin. There is a loss of axillary and pubic hair, and alopecia, or baldness, appears. Men generally experience more obvious loss of hair from the head than do women. Balding may have a significant impact on self-esteem. Women may also begin to experience the growth of facial hair on their faces. Nails become dull, and yellow or gray. They become thick and break or split easily.

- **Damage from sun exposure**: Persons who spend a lot of time in the sun, whether because of their occupations or simply from their desire to acquire a deep, dark tan, are at risk for a number of health problems, particularly skin cancer. It is estimated that more than 90 percent of skin cancers are related to exposure to the sun. The cumulative effects of years of sun exposure increase the amount of age-related changes, such as wrinkles and freckles, and often make people appear older than they really are. Damage done by the sun is not reversible.

**Assessment tip**: Some drugs increase a person’s sensitivity to sunlight. Some examples are antibiotics, antihistamines, antidepressants and antiarrhythmics. As always, educate patients about the risk for sun sensitivity if they are on medications that increase this problem.

Skin cancer is a common problem among older adults. It is important that nurses recognize potentially malignant lesions and initiate appropriate follow-up and treatment. Skin cancer is the most common type of cancer in the United States. Its effects range from mild, easily curable lesions, to devastating, life-threatening malignancies.

**Basal cell carcinomas**: Basal cell cancer is the most common type of skin cancer in Caucasians. It is primarily due to sun exposure. Fortunately, if diagnosed early, basal cell cancer has a cure rate of 95 percent.46 When assessing the patient’s skin, be alert to the presence of basal cell cancers. This type of skin cancer can occur on any exposed surface of the skin, but is most common on the face, head, neck, nose, and ears.

There are three types of basal cell cancers. They are:

- **Noduloculcerative lesions**: Usually found on the face, these lesions are small, smooth, ink and translucent papules. As they grow, their centers become depressed with firm, elevated borders. They seldom metastasize, but if untreated they can become infected or lead to hemorrhage if they move into large blood vessels.

- **Superficial basal cell lesions**: Commonly found on the chest and back, these cancers are oval or irregular in shape, lightly pigmented and have clearly defined, slightly elevated threadlike borders. They look scaly and may be mistaken for psoriasis or eczema. These lesions are associated with ingestion or exposure to arsenic-containing substances.

- **Sclerosing basal cell lesions**: These lesions are waxy, yellow to white plaques and do not have clearly defined borders. They are most often found on the head and neck and appear in patches.

Report suspicious lesions for medical follow-up. Diagnosis is based on appearance and biopsy. Treatment involves careful excision and possibly chemotherapy and/or radiation, depending on the extent of the lesion.

**Squamous cell cancer** is the second most common type of skin cancer in Caucasians and the most common type of skin cancer in persons with dark skin.49 It is an invasive tumor that has the potential to metastasize. Clues to the existence of squamous cell cancer are changes in existing skin lesions (e.g. moles, warts) or the appearance of a new lesion that ulcerates and fails to heal. This type of skin cancer, if diagnosed and treated early, has a high cure rate. But if it spreads, it can lead to disability or death.

Squamous cell cancer often develops on the face, ears and dorsa of the hands and forearms. Risk factors for this type of skin cancer include sun overexposure or overexposure to X-rays, radiation therapy, chronic irritation of the skin, and ingestion of arsenic-containing substances. It is most commonly found in fair-skinned white men older than 60 years of age.

Diagnosis is based on appearance and biopsy. Treatment includes excision, and if the tumor is extensive, radiation therapy, or possibly chemotherapy.

**Malignant melanoma** is the most serious of all skin cancers and is responsible for more than 75 percent of all deaths due to skin cancers. Melanoma lesions may grow from an existing mole or appear as a new lesion. In appearance, melanoma lesions grow and become brown, black or multicolored. They develop nodules or plaques with irregular black outlines. Melanomas may crust or bleed and are usually larger than 6 mm in diameter.

Appearance and biopsy confirm diagnosis. These lesions are treated with surgical resection that may include removal of the lymph nodes. Chemotherapy may also be part of the treatment plan, depending on the size and extent of the lesion.

Part of your assessment should include patient education regarding the prevention of skin cancers. Advise patients to avoid exposure to the sun, especially between the hours of 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Sunscreen should be used year-round, and clothing should cover the arms and legs when spending time in the sun. A broad-brimmed hat should be worn to protect the face and scalp. Patients should perform regular skin checks to monitor the appearance of new lesions or changes in old ones. Be sure to explain the potential for photosensitivity that some medications can cause. Encourage that patient to have an adequate intake of vitamin D, because this vitamin may actually lower the risk of certain cancers.

Older adults are also susceptible to skin breakdown and skin infections. Because of the fragility of the elderly person’s skin and decreasing sensation, older adults are at high risk for skin breakdown. A slight cut may go unnoticed until it becomes infected. Sitting or sleeping for long periods of time in one position may lead to redness and even breakdown of the skin over bony prominences. Persons who rely
on wheelchairs for their mobility are at particular risk for skin breakdown over the sacrum and gluteal areas.

Teach patients how to prevent or reduce their risk for skin breakdown. Here are some points to include in your teaching.

- **Eat a nutritious diet.** Proper nutrition helps all body systems to maintain a healthy balance.
- **Encourage adequate hydration.** Older adults dehydrate easily and need adequate amounts of fluid. Discourage excessive intake of caffeine and alcohol.
- **Avoid sitting or lying in one position for extended periods.** Change positions frequently. If using a wheelchair for mobility, change your position by lifting the weight off the buttocks several times every hour.
- **Massage bony prominences such as the heels, hips and elbows.** Use moisturizing lotion. Use gentle motions. Vigorous massage may bruise or tear the skin. Avoid lotions with large amounts of perfume because these can further dry the skin.
- **Examine the skin for reddened areas, cuts, abrasions, and lacerations.** Seek medical attention for such areas that fail to heal, bleed, swell, become red and warm to the touch, or drain pus or foul-smelling discharge.
- **Avoid having bath or shower water too hot.** Older persons’ skin burns easily.
- **Examine the skin for changes in moles, lesions, and freckles.** Note any newly developing moles, lesions or freckles.
- **Avoid wearing clothing that is too tight or rubs or irritates the skin.** This can lead to skin breakdown.
- **Avoid wearing shoes that are too tight or too loose.** Tight shoes can damage the skin. If shoes are too loose, they may rub up and down with walking, which can also cause skin irritation.
- **Avoid wearing jewelry or watches that rub or irritate the skin.**

**Assessment tip:** Help elders to identify a family member, close friend or caregiver to help perform skin examination and skin care as needed. It may not be possible to examine the entire body without help.

The cosmetic skin changes due to aging may cause a negative change in body image in the older adult. Monitor older adults for signs of depression or unrelied stress and anxiety related to appearance. Never assume that because a patient is “old,” he may not be concerned about his physical appearance. Remember that pride in appearance is a life-long trait and should be considered when working with patients of all ages.

### The cardiovascular system

Cardiovascular disease is the No. 1 cause of death in the United States. Nurses, when assessing the geriatric patient’s cardiovascular system, should not only be alert to normal aging changes and pathologies, but also to opportunities to teach patients ways to enhance their cardiovascular health throughout the life span.

**Mr. Lewis is 80 years old. He is hypertensive, has an elevated cholesterol, and suffered a moderately significant myocardial infarction one year ago. He takes his medication on schedule but does not follow his recommended low-fat, low-cholesterol diet.** Mr. Lewis arrives at his physician’s office for a routine check-up. His nurse performs the initial assessment and reviews his lab work, which indicates his cholesterol is still higher than normal, even though he takes his medication as prescribed. Mr. Lewis explains: “I eat bacon and eggs every morning, I’m not supposed to, but I’ve eaten bacon and eggs every morning for 60 years and I’m not changing now. Those egg substitutes are terrible!” Should the nurse re-emphasize the importance of eliminating his morning breakfast eggs as recommended by the dietician? Or is there a compromise that can be reached with her geriatric patient?

This scenario illustrates one of the challenges of geriatric nursing practice. The nurse knows the clinical importance of adhering to his diet. But sometimes a compromise must be reached. As part of cardiovascular assessment (and patient education), the nurse must be able to work with, not in opposition to, her patient’s pursuit of health and wellness. Mr. Lewis may not be willing to eliminate eggs from his diet, but would he be willing to reduce the number of times a week he eats eggs? How much input has he had in his plan of care? What options has he been offered? Remember that the patient is the most important partner in the establishment of, and adherence to, an effective treatment plan.

### Age-related changes in the cardiovascular system

It can be challenging to distinguish between disease pathology and normal aging changes in the cardiovascular system. A decrease in cardiac tolerance may be due to disease or simply an effect of the aging process.

However, age does not necessarily equate with cardiac health. A middle-aged person who eats a diet high in saturated fat, smokes and leads a sedentary lifestyle may very well have poorer cardiac functioning than an elderly person who has maintained an active lifestyle, exercises and eats a “heart healthy” diet. Here are some normal cardiovascular changes that are associated with aging:4-5

- Heart valves lose elasticity and stiffen, thus decreasing cardiac conductivity.
- Left ventricular wall thickens.
- Increased potential for postural hypotension.
- Increased risk for arrhythmias.
- Arterial elasticity decreases, which increases the risk for systolic hypertension and left ventricular hypertrophy.
- Increased risk for “silent” heart attack.
- Decreased blood perfusion to vital organs and the periphery of the body. This is due to arterial “stiffening,” and may make it difficult to palpate some peripheral pulses.
- Veins thicken, allowing for increased valvular reflux (backflow of blood) and increasing the risk for varicosities and dependency edema after sitting or standing for long periods of time.
- Decreased cardiac ability to handle stressful activities, such as shoveling snow.

**Assessment tip:** You may hear bruits (swishing or blowing sounds) over arteries such as the carotid arteries in elderly patients who have atherosclerosis. Pay special attention to this finding because there is a high incidence of stroke associated with bruits.4

Although the preceding normal aging changes must be acknowledged, nurses should not expect older adults to experience a debilitated cardiac system because of aging alone. By remaining physically active, not smoking, maintaining a normal weight, eating a healthy diet, and controlling blood pressure and cholesterol, geriatric patients can lead healthy lives and maintain a healthy cardiac status. However, chest pain, abnormal fatigue and significant sleep disturbances are not normal and may indicate cardiac pathology. Let’s review some of the more common cardiac problems seen in elderly persons: hypertension and myocardial infarction (heart attack).

### Hypertension

About 25 percent of American adults have hypertension. Untreated, high blood pressure can lead to stroke, heart attack, blindness and renal dysfunction. It increases the work-load of the heart, which can lead to heart failure and pulmonary edema.24

The National Institutes classify blood pressure based on stages as follows:3-4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Systolic</th>
<th>Diastolic</th>
<th>Stage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;120 mm Hg</td>
<td>&lt;80 mm Hg</td>
<td>Normal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>120-139 mm Hg</td>
<td>Or 80 to 89 mm Hg</td>
<td>Pre-hypertension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>140 to 159 mm Hg</td>
<td>Or 90 to 99 mm Hg</td>
<td>Hypertension Stage 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;160 mm Hg</td>
<td>Or &gt; 100 mm Hg</td>
<td>Hypertension Stage 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Assessment tip:** A systolic blood pressure greater than 140 mm Hg is a more significant cardiovascular disease risk factor than diastolic blood pressure.

If blood pressure readings indicate hypertension, make sure that the cuff size is appropriate for the patient’s arm circumference and that the cuff is properly applied. Check blood pressure in standing, sitting and supine positions. Ask the patient whether he drinks beverages containing caffeine or if he is stressed or emotionally upset, which can cause an elevated reading. Do not initiate treatment based on one reading, especially if dietary or emotional factors influence readings.4-24
Patient education for older adults should include these items:24
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Reduce salt intake.
- Stop or do not start smoking.
- Initiate a medically approved exercise program.
- Increase potassium, especially if taking potassium-depleting diuretics. Fruits and vegetables are good sources of potassium.
- Reduce stress. A consult concerning methods of relieving stress (counseling, relaxation techniques, etc.) may be necessary.

Assessment tip: Remember that the patient must be a partner in developing treatment regimens! His cooperation is essential if treatment and patient education are to be effective.

Heart attack
Most nurses are aware of the signs and symptoms of heart attack. Many patients are aware of them as well. Most clinicians and even laypersons think of crushing, substernal chest pain; jaw pain; pain that radiates to the left arm, neck, jaw or shoulder; sweating; nausea; vomiting; and some respiratory discomfort as typical presenting symptoms.21 However, these typical symptoms may not be present. In fact, women often present with atypical symptoms. Let’s review the atypical symptoms as part of the assessment process because such signs and symptoms may not be as familiar as the typical symptoms.

Women and heart attack
After a woman experiences menopause, she is at as much risk as men. Women are typically older than men when they present with symptoms of cardiovascular disease. This is because, prior to menopause, estrogen seems to offer some protection against cardiovascular disease. Therefore, the earliest presenting age of symptoms is generally older, but this depends on the age of the woman when she experienced menopause.

One in four women die of heart disease in the United States. (One in 30 die of breast cancer). Twenty-three percent of women die within one year after having their first heart attack, and within six years of having a heart attack, approximately 46 percent of women become disabled with heart failure. About 66 percent of women who have heart attacks fail to make full recoveries.9

These statistics illustrate how important it is for older women to be assessed for heart disease. Part of this assessment is to identify those atypical symptoms of heart attack in women, who are more likely to experience:24,25
- Indigestion or “gas-like” pain.
- Feelings of “tightness” in chest.
- Fullness or pressure in the chest.
- Discomfort in the back, neck, stomach or jaw.
- Dizziness.
- Shortness of breath.
- Nausea.
- Cold sweat.
- Unexplained feelings of weakness and extreme fatigue.
- Pain or discomfort between the shoulder blades.
- Sense of impending doom.

Women may also experience the typical symptoms the same as men. But their atypical symptoms are just as significant as those experienced by men. It is imperative that nurses teach their female patients about the symptoms women are likely to experience when having a heart attack. If they do not recognize signs and symptoms indicating a medical emergency, they may delay or refuse to seek help. In fact, findings from recent research show that women wait an average of 22 minutes longer than men to seek help when having a heart attack.9 This delay can cause serious complications, including death. The sooner treatment is initiated, the better are the chances of reducing damage to the heart and resulting complications.

In summary, cardiac status in older adults does not necessarily deteriorate enough to adversely affect health and well-being. Leading a “heart-healthy” life can promote cardiac wellness throughout the life span.

The respiratory system
As with the cardiovascular system, it can be difficult to distinguish normal age-related changes from pathology in the older person’s respiratory system. The following changes in lung physiology and structure occur with normal aging and can influence the effectiveness of respirations.9
- Decrease in lung elasticity, reducing the ability of the lungs to recoil.
- Decreased airway clearance, cough reflex and laryngeal reflex.
- Chest muscles are decreased in strength; chest wall stiffens.
- Ciliary action decreases, which increases the risk of respiratory infection as well as aspiration.
- Decreased ability of the lungs to respond to elevated levels of carbon dioxide.
- Immune system antibody production decreases, thus increasing susceptibility to lung infections.

Assessment tip: Smoking contributes to all forms of lung disease. Help patients to quit smoking. Be aware of smoking cessation programs that patients can access.

Here are some patient education items to help patients avoid or reduce the risk for lung disease.24,25
- Stop smoking!
- Avoid contact with family and friends if they are ill.
- Wash hands frequently. Carry antibacterial hand wash and use it when in public.
- Receive the pneumonia vaccine if not contraindicated.
- Drink plenty of fluids to maintain hydration and keep lung secretions moist.
- Take 10 deep breaths every hour to expand lungs.

Let’s look at some lung diseases that are often found in older patients and treatment issues impacted by age.

Pneumonia
Pneumonia, an acute infection of the lungs, is among the leading causes of death in the United States.24 Prognosis is usually good for persons with normal lung function. However, age-related changes in the respiratory system can make it difficult for elderly patients to recover.

Currently the vaccination for pneumonia is recommended for all individuals aged 65 and older and for all adults who are dealing with chronic illnesses or have suppressed immune systems. The vaccine is about 80 percent effective, but effectiveness does decrease over time.9

Patients who are immobile after surgery, have limited mobility due to physical deterioration or who lead sedentary lifestyles are at risk for lung disease. Encourage patients to change position, become and stay ambulatory, and take frequent deep breaths. As always help patients access smoking cessation programs if they smoke!

Assessment tip: A word about influenza. Encourage elderly patients to be vaccinated against the flu annually. They may think that it is not a serious illness, but it can be fatal, especially in those of advanced age!

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) is chronic airway obstruction that is the result of emphysema, chronic bronchitis, asthma or any combination of these diseases.24 Smoking is probably responsible for more than 90 percent of diagnosed cases of COPD.9 Other contributing factors include chronic respiratory infections, air pollution and inflamed lung tissues.24

COPD also compromises cardiac function, placing strain on the right ventricle, which is responsible for pumping blood into the lungs.9 Older patients are particularly vulnerable to compromised cardiac function as a result of COPD.

The earliest clue to the presence of COPD is an early morning cough that produces clear sputum. Periods of wheezing may occur if the patient has a “cold.” As the disease progresses, shortness of breath develops and becomes progressively worse.9,24 The usual progression of COPD looks like this:9
- There are usually no symptoms within the first 10 years after the patient starts to smoke.
- At about 10 years after starting to smoke, the patient develops a chronic cough that produces a clear sputum.
- At the age of 40 or 50, the patient begins to exhibit dyspnea.
- At about the age of 50, patients begin to be vulnerable to respiratory infections with progressively longer recovery times.
- As COPD progresses, shortness of breath occurs with the most minor activities, such as making a bed.
Assessment tip: Elderly patients who suffer from COPD often have calluses on their elbows. This is the result of leaning over tables to stretch out their upper body so that more air can enter and leave the lungs during respiration.\textsuperscript{9,24} Be alert for this sign. Watch for signs that your patient is attempting to stretch out his torso to facilitate breathing.

**Lung cancer**

Lung cancer is the most common cause of cancer deaths in men and women. The most current available statistics show that in 2004, lung cancer was responsible for more deaths than breast cancer, prostate cancer and colon cancer combined.\textsuperscript{9,24} Once more predominant in men, lung cancer rates in women are rapidly increasing as the incidence of female smokers increases.

Lung cancer is largely preventable.\textsuperscript{24} Smoking is the biggest risk factor for developing the disease. The pollutants in tobacco smoke cause progressive lung cell degeneration. Lung cancer is about 10 times more common in smokers than non-smokers, and 80 percent of patients with lung cancer are smokers.\textsuperscript{9,24}

Symptoms of lung cancer mimic symptoms of other lung diseases. Chronic cough, shortness of breath, coughing up blood, fatigue, weight loss and frequent lung infections are common symptoms.\textsuperscript{9,24} Older patients may undergo surgical removal of the tumor, part of the lung, or the entire lung depending on the extent of the tumor and the patient’s general condition. Radiation and chemotherapy may also be necessary.\textsuperscript{9,24}

**Pulmonary embolism**

Pulmonary embolism is not a disease but a complication of primarily hospitalized patients. It occurs when part of the pulmonary arterial bed is obstructed by a dislodged thrombus, an air bubble, or tissue fragment of lipids.\textsuperscript{9,24} Pulmonary embolism results in about 100,000 deaths every year and is the third leading cause of death in the United States.\textsuperscript{9} Symptoms of pulmonary embolism include rapid respirations, dyspnea, chest pain, hypoxia, decreased cardiac output and possibly shock.\textsuperscript{9,24}

Risk factors for pulmonary embolism include immobility, surgery, obesity, clotting disorders, dehydration, atherosclerotic changes in the elderly person’s circulatory system and atrial fibrillation.\textsuperscript{9} Many of these risk factors are found in the elderly population as part of normal aging changes. Teach your patients how to avoid this complication, especially if you know they are facing upcoming surgery.

- Teach patients to change position and move lower extremities frequently

**Smoking cessation**

Since smoking cessation is so critical to the prevention of and reducing the effects of lung disease, it is worthwhile to spend some time discussing ways to facilitate the process.

Some older adults (and some health care professionals as well) may believe that if they have smoked most of their lives, it will do no good to stop now. This is not true! The effects of smoking can actually begin to reverse themselves. If older adults stop smoking, their risk of heart attack, stroke and cancer goes down. Circulation improves and so does lung function. Eliminating tobacco products can also help to keep diseases such as COPD and bronchitis from getting worse.\textsuperscript{9}

Some older adults may think that they are more likely to return to smoking after they have quit. In fact, research shows that older smokers are much more likely than younger smokers to stay away from tobacco products. Older smokers also seem to know more about the health benefits of quitting smoking.\textsuperscript{9}

How can you help older patients to stop smoking? Here are some suggestions.

- Involve the patient’s family, friends and/ or caregivers. It is not easy to quit smoking, and the support of significant others in the patients’ lives can be a big help.
- Find out if the patient lives with or has frequent contact with people who smoke. It is very difficult to stay away from tobacco products if constantly in the company of others who are smoking. If possible, the patient may be able to avoid the company of others who smoke.
- Consult with the patient’s physician or nurse practitioner about prescription and non-prescription aids for smoking cessation.
- Keep an objective, non-judgmental attitude. Stopping smoking is difficult, and feeling that nurses and other health care professionals disapprove of them or their behaviors only makes the process more difficult. Patients need encouragement and support to stop smoking.
- Find out about reputable smoking cessation programs in the community and on the Internet. Support groups can be very helpful.
- Many older adults often explore the Internet and seek out health information online. There are many excellent health resources on the Web. However, there are also many fraudulent, inaccurate sources of information. Familiarize yourself with websites that are good sources of information and support for those trying to quit smoking. Older adults who have limited access to transportation or who have limited mobility may rely on the Internet for information and communication with others. Be able to guide them towards reliable online sources of smoking cessation programs.

The endocrine system

The endocrine system is responsible for managing the body’s metabolic functioning. The endocrine glands manufacture and release hormones that trigger cellular responses and actions.\textsuperscript{9,24}

Normal age-related changes in the endocrine system include:\textsuperscript{9,24}

- Decreased pancreatic secretion of insulin.
- Decreased body sensitivity to insulin, which causes changes in blood glucose levels.
- The peripheral tissues of the body become resistant to insulin. This resistance is especially evident in persons who are obese.
- Changes in thyroid function that can cause systemic problems.

The normal age-related changes in the endocrine system most predominantly affect the body’s use of insulin and the ability of the thyroid to function. Therefore, let’s look at the effects of diabetes mellitus and thyroid malfunction.

**Diabetes mellitus**

Diabetes mellitus (DM) is quite prevalent, and its incidence is increasing in people who are over the age of 65. This increase is especially evident in persons who belong to racial and ethnic minorities.\textsuperscript{9}

Type 1 DM is usually an autoimmune disease and most often affects children and young adults. Type 2 DM most often begins as insulin resistance because of changes in the endocrine system and is linked to old age, family history and obesity. The incidence of type 2 DM is increasing in the geriatric population.\textsuperscript{9,24}

**Risk factors for DM 2** include the following factors:\textsuperscript{9,24}

- Over 45 years of age: risk increases with age.
- Obesity.
- Inactive lifestyle.
- Hypertension.
- Family history of DM.
- Elevated cholesterol.
- Persons of African American, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, Asian American, and Native American origin.
- Impaired glucose tolerance.

Signs and symptoms include fatigue, polyuria dehydration, thirst, poor skin turgor, dry mucous membranes and unexplained weight loss.\textsuperscript{9,24} Older patients with DM may most often exhibit the following:\textsuperscript{9,24}

- Excessive thirst: This is a cardinal symptom. However, older adults may not report excessive thirst because the thirst mechanism functions less effectively in older adults than in younger adults.
- Excessive hunger.
- Blurred vision.
- Vaginal infections.
- Frequent urinary tract infections in women.
- Skin infections.
- Difficulty healing.
Assessment tip: To help prevent urinary tract infections, encourage older patients to drink cranberry juice, which is believed to stop bacteria from sticking to the lining of the bladder.9

The treatment regimen for DM in older adults is similar to that of younger adults. There are a few issues that deserve special emphasis in the older population, however. These include the following:9,24

- **Meticulous foot care**: The older person must be taught (or his caregiver taught) to examine his feet for any open areas, cracks or evidence of compromised skin integrity. Feet should be washed and carefully dried every day. Special attention should be given to the areas between the toes, which are harder to keep dry. Socks should be changed daily and be kept clean and dry. Referral to a podiatrist is appropriate. Older persons with DM should not cut their own toenails because of the risk of cutting the skin of the feet, thus increasing the risk of infection and should visit a podiatrist regularly to have their toenails cut and feet evaluated. Shoes should be fit by someone who is familiar with the problems of DM. If cost is an issue, refer patients for financial counseling. Nurses should be aware of podiatrists in the community who make special arrangements for older persons in financial difficulty. Teach the patient never to walk barefoot.

- **Checking blood glucose**: Evaluate the older adult’s ability to perform blood glucose monitoring and evaluate the results. As necessary, teach other family members or caregivers to perform this task.

- **Medications**: Teach patients, families and/or caregivers about the medications the patient is taking and the potential for side effects.

- **Diet**: The dietician should be involved in helping the patient understand dietary implications. If the patient is unable to adhere to dietary restrictions, programs such as Meals on Wheels may be initiated.

- **Signs and symptoms**: Teach patients, family members and caregivers the signs of hyperglycemia and hypoglycemia and what to do in the event of occurrences.

- **Blood pressure**: Help the patient to adhere to blood pressure management regimen. If he is not hypertensive, teach him ways to avoid developing high blood pressure.

- **Exercise**: In conjunction with the patient’s physician, physical therapy and others, nurses must help the patient to design an exercise program appropriate for his state of health and wellness.

Management of DM is a lifelong endeavor. The nurse must help the patient, family and caregivers to adapt to the lifestyle modifications necessary for the maintenance (or achievement) of a maximum state of health and well-being. The elderly patient may have difficulty adjusting to some aspects of the ongoing nature of DM management. Physical limitations may prevent him from performing foot care or administering insulin, if needed. Nurses need to make sure that the patient has adequate resources and support systems to help him manage his care.

**Thyroid problems**

The incidence of thyroid disorders increases with age. As a person ages, the thyroid slowly loses its ability to function and begins to atrophy. It becomes more nodular, and the occurrence of thyroid nodules and hyperthyroidism increases significantly with age. The thyroid antibody levels rise with age, which makes it difficult to determine whether such elevation is pathological or part of the aging process. Hyperthyroidism rates are similar for younger persons and older adults, but the disease may produce less obvious symptoms in the elderly, making diagnosis problematic. The incidence of hyperthyroidism is quite a bit higher in women compared to men in all age groups, and is higher in the elderly who live in long-term care facilities than older persons who live in the community.9

Some important points about hyperthyroidism in the older adult are:9,24

- **Hyperthyroidism is harder to diagnosis in the elderly compared to younger people because older adults present fewer signs and symptoms. Additionally, their symptoms may be different than those of younger persons.**

- **The predominant symptoms of hyperthyroidism in older people are rapid heart rate, weight loss, fatigue, apathy, changes in sleep patterns, mood changes, changes in bowel movements, visual disturbances and weakness. The thyroid is usually not enlarged nor is it easy to palpate. By contrast, the predominant symptoms in younger persons are nervousness, anxiety, heat intolerance, sweating and an enlarged thyroid.**

- **About 27 percent of older persons who have hyperthyroidism present with some type of cardiac symptoms such as atrial fibrillation, chest pain, angina and even heart failure. These symptoms may be mistaken for active cardiac disease, and the actual cause, hyperthyroidism, may be overlooked or not even considered.**

Nurses need to be aware of conditions, such as hyperthyroidism, that mimic other conditions common in the elderly population. Treatment of hyperthyroidism in older adults generally consists of ingesting radioactive sodium iodide instead of surgery. If treatment results in hypothyroidism, thyroid replacement therapy is initiated.9,24

Hyperthyroidism is rather common. Here are some points about hyperthyroidism in the elderly population.9,24

- **The older person who is diagnosed with hypothyroidism is typically a female over the age of 50.**

- **Older persons who have hypothyroidism present with fewer symptoms than do younger people. Generally, their symptoms are rather non-specific and can be attributed to a variety of other health problems.**

- **The symptoms of hypothyroidism most often noted in older people include mental deterioration, new patterns of incontinence, reduction in mobility and difficulty coping.**

- **Untreated hypothyroidism may lead to hypertension and hyperlipidemia, both of which are common in the elderly population. A life-threatening complication of untreated hypothyroidism is myxedema coma, a life-threatening medical emergency. In myxedema coma, mental confusion deteriorates to stupor and coma and significant electrolyte imbalances. Emergency intensive care hospitalization is required if this potentially lethal complication develops.**

The goal of treatment of hypothyroidism in the older adult is to alleviate symptoms and return the thyroid-stimulating hormone (TSH) to normal levels. However, TSH replacement must be done with caution because an increase in levels may trigger significant cardiac problems.9

In summary, thyroid problems in the elderly patient are often difficult to diagnose. Presenting signs and symptoms may be subtle and mimic a variety of diseases and disorders commonly found in this population. It is important to rule out conditions such as heart disease and to determine whether two or more problems co-exist simultaneously.

Unfortunately, because of the vagueness of clinical presentation, thyroid disorders are often overlooked in the elderly patient. Nurses have excellent opportunities to serve as advocates for patients and to remain aware of the possibility of thyroid disease when they perform geriatric assessment. If thyroid disease is suspected, nurses should advocate for laboratory assessment of thyroid hormone levels.

Some of the nurse’s responsibilities include the provision of careful patient education. Patients will most likely be on some type of medication for the remainder of their lives. They need to understand the importance of taking their medication as prescribed. They also need to be aware of the signs and symptoms of hyper- and hypothyroidism. Patient education efforts should focus on disease management and adherence to treatment regimens.

**The hematologic system**

The main function of the hematologic system is the ability of the circulating blood to transport oxygen and nutrients to the body’s internal organs and peripheral tissues and to remove carbon dioxide and waste products.9

There are a number of age-related changes that occur in the hematologic system. These include the following:9,24

- **As the body ages, the bone marrow’s ability to manufacture red blood cells (RBC) swiftly in the event of blood loss or disease slows. This does not usually have a major impact on health and wellness unless the blood loss or disease process is extensive.**

- **Hemoglobin and hematocrit values are slightly decreased, but should remain within normal ranges.**
There is a reduction in the number of stem cells.
- There is a decreased production of intrinsic factor, which can trigger pernicious anemia.
- Cellular immunity decreases.
- The functional ability of the lymphocytes decreases.

The most common hematologic disorder is anemia. Although common in older adults, anemia is not a normal age-related change, contrary to what some health care professionals may believe. Anemia is a sign of disease, and if it occurs, it cannot be successfully treated until the underlying cause is addressed. Anemia exists when there is an inadequate amount of hemoglobin to meet the body’s needs. It is defined as a reduction in the number of circulating RBCs. This reduction can be due to loss of blood, an abnormally high rate of RBC destruction, or an inadequate or impaired production of RBCs.

There are several types of anemia. Some of those most commonly found in elderly patients are as follows:

**Pernicious anemia**

Pernicious anemia is characterized by a decreased gastric production of hydrochloric acid and a deficiency of intrinsic factor. Factors that contribute to this problem are small bowel disease, infection, excessive use of antacids, overgrowth of intestinal bacteria and a strict vegetarian diet. The incidence of pernicious anemia increases with age. As people age, the body’s ability to absorb vitamin B12 diminishes. This vitamin is necessary for RBC growth.

Signs and symptoms of pernicious anemia include:

- Cardinal signs of weakness, sore tongue, and numbness and tingling of the extremities.
- Lips, gums and tongue seem to be bloodless.
- Patients are quite vulnerable to infections.
- The sclera and skin may be jaundiced.
- GI symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, weight loss, diarrhea, flatulence, and constipation. The tongue may become inflamed, and the gums may bleed.
- Neurologic symptoms: Weakness, poor coordination, ataxia, dizziness, and loss of bowel and bladder control.
- Cardiovascular symptoms: Reduced hemoglobin levels, decreased cardiac output, rapid heart rate and arrhythmias.
- Musculoskeletal symptoms: Scissors gait may develop as a late sign if pernicious anemia goes untreated.

Pernicious anemia is treated with a high dose of parenteral vitamin B12 replacement therapy. This triggers rapid regeneration of RBCs. After hemoglobin levels return to normal and the patient’s condition stabilizes, vitamin B12 can be administered monthly at maintenance level doses. Since the patient must continue to receive vitamin B12 injections for the rest of his life, he, a family member, or caregiver should learn to administer the injections.

**Folic acid deficiency anemia**

Folic acid deficiency anemia is a common, slowly progressive anemia seen in not only the elderly but in infants, adolescents, pregnant and lactating women, alcoholics, and people with cancer or intestinal diseases. Folic acid deficiency may be due to poor diet, impaired absorption, and prolonged use of certain medications such as anticonvulsants and estrogen.24

**Assessment tip:** Older adults living alone or who are impaired physically and mentally may lack essential nutrients in their diets. Remember that part of nutritional assessment should include screening for anemia.

Typical symptoms of folic acid deficiency anemia include fatigue, shortness of breath, fainting, irritability, nausea, anorexia and headache. Treatment consists of the administration of folic acid supplements and correction of underlying causes. Supplements may be given orally or parenterally.24

**Assessment tip:** Teach elderly patients about foods that are high in folic acid to help prevent folic acid deficiency anemia. Such foods include liver, orange juice, whole grains, beans, nuts and dark green leafy vegetables.9

**Hemolytic anemia**

Hemolytic anemia is due to the premature destruction of RBCs (hemolysis). The body attempts to compensate for this destruction by increasing production of immature RBCs in the bone marrow. Hemolytic anemia becomes more common with aging. Infections, malignancies, trauma burns and exposure to toxic substances can cause this type of anemia. Drugs associated with its development include ibuprofen, aspirin, acetaminophen, insulin, some antibiotics and sulfonamides.9,14

The focus of treatment is folic acid supplements, because folic acid is depleted with increased bone marrow production of RBCs. Correction of underlying causes must also be accomplished. In addition to supplement administration, the patient’s diet should be rich in foods high in folic acid such as beans, nuts, whole grains and green leafy vegetables.

**Malignancies of the hematologic system**

Malignancies of the hematologic system are associated with overproduction of lymphoid and myeloid cells linked with bone marrow failure. They are characterized by the accrual of large numbers of white blood cells (WBC) in the bone marrow, liver, spleen, lymph nodes and central nervous system.

**Acute leukemia**

Acute leukemia is a proliferation of the precursors of WBCs in bone marrow or lymph tissue. They accumulate in bone marrow, body tissues and peripheral blood. With treatment, children between the ages of 2 and 8 have the best chance of survival (about 50 percent). Adults, however, generally survive about only about one year after diagnosis, even with treatment.24

Onset in children is quite dramatic. In older adults, the onset is more gradual, with presenting symptoms of weakness, pallor and acute confusion. The liver, spleen and lymph nodes are found to be enlarged upon palpation. Persons of advanced age have a poor prognosis. Treatment involves the administration of various combinations of drugs to inhibit WBC production. Bone marrow transplant is rarely initiated in persons over the age of 65. Infections are a leading cause of death in older patients, who, even with treatment, relapse within one year.

**Chronic lymphocytic leukemia**

Chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL) is a progressive disease that is common in the elderly. It is characterized by uncontrollable spread of abnormal lymphocytes in bone, bone marrow and lymphoid tissue. Almost all patients diagnosed with CLL are over the age of 50.24

Typical symptoms include fever, fatigue, malaise and lymph node enlargement. As the disease reaches advanced stages, fatigue, weight loss, bone pain and liver or spleen enlargement become apparent. Treatment consists of chemotherapy and radiation. Curiously enough, early treatment is not associated with increased survival. Thus, treatment is not initiated in older persons until they manifest weight loss, night sweats, fever or enlarged lymph nodes.

**Lymphomas**

**Hodgkin’s disease**

Hodgkin’s disease is a malignancy of the lymphoid tissue characterized by painless, progressive enlargement of lymph nodes, spleen and other lymphoid tissue. This disease is most common in young adults, but its incidence peaks in two age groups: persons who are between 15 and 35 and people over 50.

It is believed that there is a viral connection associated with the development of Hodgkin’s disease, with the Epstein-Barr virus as the focus of attention. Risk factors include a family history of infectious mononucleosis and an immune system that is compromised.24

Symptoms include painlessly enlarged lymph nodes, persistent fever, night sweats, fatigue, weight loss, pruritis and anemia. The disease is treated with radiation, chemotherapy, or both and depends on the stage of the disease. Older adults usually receive chemotherapy for six to eight months.

**Non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma** is a malignancy of lymphoid tissue but is not diagnosed as Hodgkin’s disease. It is more systemic in nature than Hodgkin’s disease, and prognosis is usually poorer. Normal lymphoid tissue is replaced by cancerous cells. This compromises the immune system and leads to infections.24

The first symptoms of the disease are usually swelling of the lymph glands, enlarged tonsils and adenoids, and painless, rubbery nodes in the cervical supraclavicular areas. Fatigue, malaise, weight loss, fever and night sweats may also be present.
The cause of non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma is unknown, but a viral link is suspected. Persons with impaired immune system abnormalities or those taking phenytoin seem to be at increased risk to develop the disease. Treatment includes chemotherapy and, in localized cases, radiation. Another option is the administration of monoclonal antibodies, specifically rituximab. Both types of lymphoma may be curable, depending on the stage of the malignancy, with radiation and aggressive chemotherapy. However, older adults may not be able to tolerate such intense treatment. The geriatric patient may need assistance with activities of daily living as he undergoes treatment for the disease, which may take six months or longer.

Patients should also take every precaution to avoid infection. They should avoid crowds, and family members and friends who are ill, even with minor infections such as colds, should not come into contact with the patient.

The nervous system

The nervous system consists of two systems: the central nervous system and the peripheral nervous system. The central nervous system consists of the brain and the spinal cord. It is responsible for the integration of all nervous system activities.

Parts of the brain include the cerebrum, the brain stem, the cerebellum, the limbic system and the reticular activating system (RAS). The cerebrum contains the nerve center that controls intelligence and motor and sensory function. The brain stem serves as the relay center for messages between the various parts of the nervous system. The cerebellum is responsible for maintaining muscle control, balance and coordination. The limbic system initiates the basic human drives such as hunger, emotional and sexual arousal and aggression. The RAS assesses all incoming sensory information and sends it to the appropriate areas of the brain for interpretation. It is also imperative for maintaining consciousness.

The brain is divided into the right and left hemispheres, which are further divided into four lobes: frontal, temporal, parietal and occipital. It is important to know the functions of the various lobes because damage to one or more locations affect various body system functions.

- The frontal lobe is responsible for personality, judgment, abstract reasoning, some aspects of language (Broca’s area), motor function, problem solving, reasoning and memory.
- The temporal lobe is responsible for language comprehension (Wernicke’s area), some memory recall and hearing.
- The parietal lobe integrates sensory information such as temperature and taste. It also interprets, size, shape, texture and distance.
- The occipital lobe interprets visual stimuli.

The spinal cord reaches from the first cervical vertebrae to the lower border of the first lumbar vertebrae. The spinal cord is the major pathway for messages that travel back and forth between the brain and the body’s peripheral areas.

The peripheral nervous system is composed of the cranial nerves, spinal nerves, the somatic and autonomic nervous system, and the reflex arc. There are 12 pairs of cranial nerves that transmit motor and/or sensory communications between the brain or brain stem and the head and neck. There are 31 pairs of spinal nerves that transmit messages to and from various regions of the body. The somatic nervous system functions as the link between the brain via the spinal cord to muscles and sensory receptors. The autonomic nervous system is responsible for maintaining homeostasis. It can be a challenge to differentiate between normal aging changes of the central nervous system and pathology. The impact of aging on the nervous system varies quite a bit among elderly adults. Experts recommend that health care professionals “not treat normal aging changes as disease. A common myth is that cognitive decline is inevitable.” There are some age-related changes in memory and attention, but older adults retain the ability to learn new things and live independently as long as neurological disease and pathologies do not occur.

Here are some normal age-related changes of the nervous system:
- Decrease in size and weight of the brain.
- Decrease in number of neurons.
- Decrease in short-term memory.
- Decrease in blood flow to the brain.
- Decrease in coordination.
- Decrease or absence of deep tendon reflexes.
- Decrease in responses and movements.
- Increase in pain threshold.
- Increase in incidence of physiologic tremor.
- Decreased reaction time.
- Sleep disturbances become more common, including insomnia and loss of REM sleep.
- Incidence of mood disorders and depression increase.

Normal age-related changes may mimic pathological changes. Here are some common diseases of the nervous system seen in elderly persons.

Parkinson’s disease

Parkinson’s disease is a chronic, progressive disease characterized by progressive muscle rigidity, involuntary tremor, akinesia and dementia. Complications include aspiration pneumonia, infection, injury from falls, urinai tract infections and compromised skin integrity. Parkinson’s disease in found in two out of every 1,000 people. It usually develops after the age of 50, but can occur in children and young adults. The cause of Parkinson’s disease is not known, but research suggests that exposure to environmental toxins or genetic predisposition may play significant parts in its development. Studies of the pathophysiology of the disease show that a dopamine deficiency inhibits the affected brain cells from functioning normally.

There are no definitive diagnostic tests. Diagnosis depends on age, history and presenting signs and symptoms. Nursing assessment may be critical to the diagnosis of this and other diseases that occur in the elderly adult.

There is no cure for Parkinson’s disease. Treatment focuses on symptom relief and maximizing function for as long as possible. Drug therapy generally includes levodopa, a dopamine replacement; physical therapy; and in very severe cases, stereotactic neurosurgery or the controversial treatment of fetal cell transplantation.

Assessment tip: Dosages of anti-Parkinson drugs may need to be decreased in elderly patients because of inability to tolerate higher doses of such medications. Patients must be taught to recognize medication side effects, such as orthostatic hypotension, irregular heartbeats, anxiety or confusion.

Transient ischemic attack (TIA) or “mini-stroke”

Mrs. Stephens is 80 years old. She lives with her husband, who is 81 and dealing with prostate cancer. During an appointment with his oncologist, Mr. Stephens tells the nurse practitioner that he is worried about his wife. He says, “I think there might be something wrong with my wife. Sometimes she acts like she doesn’t know what’s going on. Her speech gets really funny, and she can hardly walk. It only lasts for a few minutes, and then she is OK. But I don’t think this is good.”

Mr. Stephens is right to be concerned about his wife. Transient ischemic attack (TIA), often referred to as a “mini-stroke,” is a neurologic deficit caused by microemboli that temporarily interrupt blood flow in the cerebral circulation. This interruption causes symptoms that correlate with the area of the brain affected and may include double vision, slurring speech, trouble walking, falling and dizziness. The effects last from seconds to hours and resolve spontaneously. There is not permanent damage from TIAs, but their occurrence is considered to be a warning sign of impending stroke. Incidence increases significantly after the age of 50 and is greatest among men and African-Americans.

The occurrence of TIAs indicates a need for meticulous assessment and actions to prevent the occurrence of stroke.

Cerebrovascular accident (stroke)

Stroke is an abrupt impairment of cerebral circulation. This impairment interrupts the flow of oxygen to the brain, which can cause serious damage to brain tissue. Depending on the location and extent of damage, the patient can be left with serious disabilities that may affect all aspects of daily living.

There are three major types of stroke.

- Thrombosis: The most common cause in middle-aged and elderly adults, thrombosis causes ischemia in brain tissue affected by diminished circulation.
Emboliom: The second most common cause of stroke, embolism is due to the occlusion of a blood vessel by a fragmented clot, tumor, fat, or air. 

Hemorrhage: The third most common cause of stroke, hemorrhage is due to a sudden rupture of a cerebral artery. 

Signs and symptoms depend on the location of the stroke and may include speech impediments, disorientation, vision disturbances, headaches, the stroke and may include speech impediments, or the possibility of convulsions.  

The sooner the patient receives emergency medical intervention, the better the chances for survival. Emergency administration of medications includes: 

- Tissue plasminogen activator to dissolve clots in non-hemorrhagic stroke. It must be administered within three hours of symptom onset. 
- The antiplatelet drug ticlopidine may be effective in preventing stroke and in reducing the risk for future strokes in patients who have already suffered one. 
- Corticosteroids may be administered to reduce cerebral edema and anticoagulants given to prevent seizures. 

Patients will need long-term follow-up and rehabilitation. 

Measures to reduce the risk for stroke include: 

- Participate in a regular exercise program. 
- Stop smoking. 
- Monitor blood pressure and take anti-hypertensives as ordered. 
- Reduce salt intake. 
- Reduce the intake of saturated fats. 
- Eat at least two servings of fish per week. 
- Eat five or more servings of fruits and vegetables every day. 
- Eat six or more servings of grain products every day. 

Seizures disorders 

Seizures occur when there is an acute, abnormal release of electrical activity in the brain. Seizures may be partial or focal or generalized. Focal seizures include a brief change in level of consciousness characterized by a blank stare, rolling of the eyes and/or a brief change in level of consciousness. Generalized seizures can include muscular jerks of the extremities or entire body, incontinence, difficulty breathing, apnea and loss of consciousness.

The nurse should assess when and how often seizures occur and what occurs during seizures. Some adults may have had seizures for many years due to problems such as epilepsy. They may also develop epilepsy in old age. Adults over 75 are twice as likely to develop new-onset epilepsy than all adult age groups less than 65 years of age.

Nurses should find out what, if anything, triggers seizures and what treatment measures are in place to control the occurrence of seizures. Patient education should stress the importance of adherence to treatment regimens and how to avoid injury in the event of seizures. Family members and caregivers must be involved in patient education as well.

The gastrointestinal system 

The gastrointestinal system undergoes quite a few changes with aging. These changes can have significant impact on a person’s nutritional status and general health and well-being. The gastrointestinal (GI) system is responsible for digestion, absorption, secretion and motility. 

Normal age-related changes in the GI system include: 

- Decrease in salivary secretion and the number of taste buds. 
- Decreased esophageal mobility. 
- Decreased size and weight of the liver. 
- Decreased rate of fat, mineral and vitamin absorption. 
- Tooth enamel and dentin erode. 
- Increased incidence of gastroesophageal reflux. 
- Increased incidence of constipation. 
- Delay in gastric mobility and emptying. 

Assessment tip: Many medications can add to the age-related changes in the GI system. These include antidepressants, antihistamines, antihypertensives, calcium channel blockers, diuretics and laxatives.

These changes contribute to a number of common age-related disorders in the geriatric patient.

Dysphagia 

Dysphagia is the most common esophageal problem in older adults. It is characterized by trouble with any part of the mechanism of swallowing foods or liquids. This problem inhibits adequate nutritional intake and can adversely affect the older adult’s health and well-being.

When assessing swallowing, the nurse should be aware of factors than increase the risk of dysphagia. 

- Reports of dysphagia from patients, families, or caregivers. 
- Observation of drooling or dribbling. 
- Observation that patient has trouble controlling food or liquids in the mouth. 
- Facial drooping or facial paralysis. 
- Changes in mental acuity that affect eating. 
- Slurred speech. 
- Coughing. 
- Pocketing food in mouth. 
- Changes in voice quality (e.g. weak voice, hoarse voice) when eating. 
- Existence of neurologic problems and/or muscle disorders.

Ungauging causes, such as tumors, dementia, neurolgic diseases and so on, should be identified and corrected or treated. Here are some tips to help reduce dysphagia. 

- Be sure that the patient is seated comfortably in an upright position. 
- Encourage a calm, pleasant atmosphere during meals.

Avoid extensive conversation. Allow patient to concentrate on eating and swallowing. 

Plan meals with patient’s food preferences in mind.

Constipation 

Constipation affects up to 20 percent of older adults in the community and between 50 percent and 75 percent of those living in long-term care facilities. Factors that contribute to constipation in the elderly include lack of adequate fluid intake, lack of adequate fiber in the diet, and side effects of medications. 

Here are some tips to reduce constipation: 

- If constipation is due to medications, consult with physician or nurse practitioner about possible changes in medication regimen. 
- Increase fluid intake unless contraindicated. 
- Increase fiber intake. 
- Increase whole grain, fruits and vegetables intake. 
- Participate in exercise as tolerated. 
- Add stool softeners or laxatives under medical supervision.

Assessment tip: Patients need to be evaluated for possible serious cause of constipation, such as impaction or bowel obstruction. Be alert to additional symptoms, such as severe abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting, which may indicate bowel obstruction, or a lump or thickening in the lower abdomen, indicating a growth or tumor. 

Fecal incontinence and diarrhea 

When evaluating diarrhea, determine the quality of diarrhea. For example, are the stools loose but formed, or water? Is the diarrhea accompanied by cramps, frequency and/or urgency? How many times a day does diarrhea occur? 

Diarrhea may be due to viral, bacterial or parasitic infection; medications; tumors; or stress. Treatment measures include identifying and correcting underlying causes and medications to relieve symptoms. 

Fecal incontinence may accompany diarrhea or exist with normal quality bowel movements. It may be due to cognitive impairment, tumors or muscle weakness. Correction of underlying causes is necessary, and a bowel-training program is often indicated. 

Assessment tip: Bloody stools or passage of blood is a medical emergency and requires immediate evaluation and intervention! 

Gastroesophageal reflux disease 

Gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD) is the backflow of gastric and/or duodenal contents into the esophagus. GERD is due to problems with deficient pressure of the lower esophagus. Symptoms range from none at all to heartburn of varying degrees of severity, and pain that radiates to the neck, jaws and arms. The patient may awaken during the night with coughing and a mouthful of saliva. 

Many patients, and even health care professionals, may believe that these symptoms
are trivial and unlikely to indicate a serious health problem. In reality, GERD may be responsible for 1,700 deaths annually in the United States. Complications include esophageal ulcer, hemorrhage, esophageal stricture, hoarseness, esophagitis and inflammation of the esophagus that can predispose the patient to the development of adenocarcinoma.

Certain medications and substances can increase the risk of GERD. These include antichoinegerics, caffeine and alcohol, nicotine, beta blockers, potassium supplements, and non-steroidal anti-inflammatory agents.

Treatment of GERD focuses on relief and control of symptoms and promotion of esophageal healing. Lifestyle changes are the first line of treatment and include the following:

- **Diet**: Avoid caffeine, chocolate, spicy foods, carbonated beverages, orange juice, tomato juice, alcohol and other beverages that stimulate the production of gastric acid. Reduce fat content in diet.
- **Positioning**: Avoid lying down for at least two hours after eating. Sleep with the head of the bed elevated six to eight inches. Avoid lying on right side, which encourages reflux.
- **Weight**: Achieve or maintain normal weight.
- **Tobacco products**: Avoid use of tobacco products.
- **Stress**: Participate in stress reduction efforts.
- **Alcohol**: Reduce or avoid the intake of alcohol.
- **Medications**: Ask about possible alterations in medical regimen.
- **Clothing**: Avoid clothing that fits tightly.
- **Exercise**: Do not exercise within one hour after meals.
- **Hydration**: Drink six to eight ounces of water with medications.

If lifestyle changes do not control GERD, medications may be necessary. These include:

- Promotility agents that improve lower esophageal sphincter tone and stimulate upper GI motility.
- Proton pump inhibitors and histamine receptor antagonists to reduce gastric acidity.
- Over-the-counter antacids, which may reduce symptoms but may cause side effects such as diarrhea, constipation and acid-base disturbances.

In severe cases, surgery may be necessary to control symptoms, prevent complications and stop hemorrhage.

**Assessment tip**: Stress the importance of lifestyle changes as the first line of treatment for GERD. Such changes are also helpful to promote overall health and, if effective, can reduce or eliminate the need for medications and/or surgery.

**Pepitic ulcers**

It is estimated that 10 percent of adults in the United States have peptic ulcer disease. Hospitalization, morbidity and mortality rates for peptic ulcer disease are higher in older adults as compared to younger persons.

Peptic ulcers are defined as circumscribed lesions in the mucus membrane and can be located in the lower esophagus, stomach, pylorus, duodenum, or jejunum. Most peptic ulcers (about 80 percent) are located in the duodenum. Gastric ulcers are most common in middle-aged and elderly men. Risk factors for peptic ulcer development include chronic use of nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, alcohol and tobacco products.

Ulcer development is caused by infection with Helicobacter pylori and pathologic hypersecretory disorders. Gastric acid is believed to contribute to the development of infection.

**Assessment tip**: Blood type seems to influence peptic ulcer development. Gastric ulcers are more common in people with type A blood, and duodenal ulcers are more common in people with type O blood.

Signs and symptoms include heartburn and indigestion, bloating, abdominal distention, and nausea. Specific symptoms are as follows. Duodenal ulcers cause heartburn, localized mid-epigastric pain that is relieved with eating, weight gain because patients eat to relieve pain, and an unusual sensation of hot water bubbling at the back of the throat. Gastric ulcers cause heartburn and indigestion, pain with eating since food causes the gastric wall to stretch, thus causing pain, and feelings of fullness and bloating.

Treatment includes antibiotic therapy, analgesics and drugs to reduce gastric acid production.

**Colorectal cancer**

Colorectal cancer is the most common cancer that develops after the age of 65. Early diagnosis and treatment is associated with improvement in survival. Routine colonoscopies are the best diagnostic tool for early diagnosis.

Signs and symptoms may not appear until the disease is advanced. They include overt or covert bleeding; change in quality and/or quantity of bowel movements; black, tarry stools; cramps; urgent need to defecate when first getting up in the morning; feelings of fullness or incomplete evacuation of stool; and blood or mucus in the stool.

Treatment depends on the extent of the tumor and the stage of the disease. It can include simple removal of the tumor, removal of part of the intestine, radiation and/or chemotherapy. A colostomy may be needed. This could be temporary or permanent.

**Assessment tip**: Elderly adults may assume that symptoms of colorectal cancer are due to aging changes and not report them. Educate patients, families and caregivers about the signs and symptoms of this type of cancer and the importance of appropriate preventive screening.

**The genitourinary system**

The genitourinary system is composed of the kidneys, ureters, bladder, and urethra, and the reproductive organs. Since this system is so broad in scope, this section concentrates on those issues most closely associated with the aging process.

Age-related changes associated with kidneys, ureters, bladder and urethra include the following:

- Nighttime production of urine increases and ability to concentrate urine decreases.
- Blood flow to the kidneys decreases.
- Glomerular filtration rate decreases.
- Bladder capacity is decreased.
- Bladder contractility increases.
- Risk of overflow incontinence and urinary retention increases in men.
- Detrusor becomes unstable in women, causing an increased potential for incontinence.
- Prostate increases in size in men.
- Half-life of drugs is prolonged due to a reduction in renal function.

**Assessment tip**: Assess for signs of drug toxicity due to changes in excretion ability of the kidneys.

Common age-related problems of the kidneys and related structures include the following:

**Urinary incontinence**

Urinary incontinence affects over 13 million adults. It is of considerable concern to older adults, who are often ashamed and embarrassed by the problem. They may not seek help for this problem because they assume it is a normal part of the aging process. Be sure to assess the older patient for urinary incontinence, because this is a problem that can be treated, reduced, and sometimes eliminated.

There are several types of urinary incontinence.

- Stress incontinence occurs when urine is involuntarily expelled when a person laughs or coughs. The muscles of the pelvic floor or urethral sphincter are not strong enough to control the loss of urine.
- Overflow incontinence occurs when the bladder muscles stretch beyond their ability to contract or when the urethra is blocked.
- Urge incontinence occurs when there are strong, unexpected contractions of the bladder muscles and the internal sphincter cannot hold the urine in the bladder.
- Functional incontinence is due to a cause not associated with the urinary system. For example, the older adult may not be able to get to a bathroom in time to avoid incontinence or he may be physically unable to reach a bathroom by himself. Another example is that of the adult whose cognition is impaired and who does not recognize the need to void.

Treatment interventions include bladder training. Bladder training involves training the bladder to hold gradually increasing amounts of urine by extending the time between trips to the bathroom. Pelvic floor exercises, also referred to as Kegel exercises, may also be helpful. These exercises involve tightening the bladder muscles and releasing them in patterns of 15. A general exercise program may also help to strengthen appropriate muscles. Bladder irritants such as spicy foods, carbonated beverages, caffeine,
and alcohol, may be avoided. There are also a number of protective undergarments that can be worn to protect clothing, stop odor and decrease embarrassment.

**Urinary tract infections**

Older adults are especially vulnerable to urinary tract infections (UTI). UTIs in older adults are often asymptomatic. Antibiotic therapy may be prescribed, although, in some asymptomatic cases, no treatment may be initiated.

**Assessment tip:** In elderly adults, the most common symptoms of UTI are often lethargy and:

- voiding
- embarrassment.

Tips to prevent UTIs include:

- Maintain adequate hydration. Cranberry juice may have some properties that fight infections.
- Void promptly when the urge to urinate occurs. Don’t wait a long time between voiding.
- Wipe from front to back after going to the bathroom.
- Avoid using products such as douches and perfumes and scented powders over the genital areas as these can irritate the urethra.

**Benign prostatic hyperplasia**

Benign prostatic hyperplasia (BPH) affects about half of men between 51 and 60 years of age and 90 percent of men over 80.9 Signs and symptoms include decreased urinary stream and force, feeling of incomplete bladder emptying, frequency and urgency, dribbling, incontinence, difficulty initiating voiding, and, at times, hematuria.

The only effective treatment is surgical removal of the prostate tissue. Such tissue is always biopsied to rule out malignancy.

**Malignancies**

Bladder cancer is fairly common in older adults, with men nearly four times as likely as women to develop this malignancy. Symptoms are similar to UTI. The first symptom is often painless hematuria. As with other cancers, treatment depends on the stage of the disease and its exact location. Chemotherapy, surgery and radiation may be part of treatment plan.

The incidence of prostate cancer in men is even higher than that of bladder cancer. Symptoms are usually not evident until the disease is advanced. That is why it is so important to have a prostate examination as part of the annual physical exam. Symptoms include lower back pain, difficulty initiating urination, dribbling, retention of urine, and hematuria. Radiation is used to treat locally invasive lesions. Surgery and hormone therapy also may be used in conjunction with radiation therapy.

**Issues related to reproductive organs**

Age-related changes in the reproductive system include:

- Decreased libido.
- Breast tissue atrophies.
- Diminished ejaculation in men and the need for more time and stimulation to reach arousal.
- Increased incidence of erectile dysfunction in men.
- Drastically decreased estrogen levels in women, which leads to vaginal dryness and possibly painful sexual intercourse.
- Increase in facial hair in women.
- Increased length of time for arousal in women.

These changes do not prevent older adults from having a satisfying sex life. It is important to assess sexuality as part of physical assessment. For more detailed information about sexual assessment and interventions see the section on Sexual assessment presented earlier in this education program.

**Common gynecological malignancies in older women**

Uterine, breast and ovarian malignancies are more common in older women than in younger women. Uterine cancer is the most common gynecological cancer in older women. The most common symptom is bleeding from the vagina after menopause. Other signs and symptoms include weight loss and pain, but these do not appear until the disease is advanced.

Treatment includes surgery, which is generally a total abdominal hysterectomy. Hormonal therapy, radiation therapy and chemotherapy in various combinations are generally part of the treatment regimen. Seventy-five percent of ovarian cancer cases occur in women over 55. Unfortunately, prognosis is often poor, especially in older women. There is no screening test at this time. However, the CA-125 blood test for tumor markers does exist. It is not recommended as a screening tool because there are no data to support the hope that such screening would decrease mortality.

Ovarian cancer is the leading cause of gynecological deaths in the United States. Symptoms are generally vague and include abdominal discomfort, dyspepsia, feeling of being bloated, urinary frequency, abdominal distention and weight loss.

Treatment includes removal of the uterus, ovaries, fallopian tubes and omentum. Aggressive therapy is usually indicated, including chemotherapy and sometimes radiation.

According to the American Cancer Society, breast cancer affects approximately one in every 14 women over 60 years old. Risk factors include: age, family history of breast cancer, early menarche and late menopause, ingestion of hormonal contraceptives, use of hormonal replacement therapy for more than five years, never having been pregnant, had first pregnancy after the age of 30, personal history of breast cancer, regular use of alcohol, history of ovarian cancer and exposure to low-level ionizing radiation.

Recent controversy over screening recommendations from various health care groups has led to some confusion about the value of screening. In general, recommendations include yearly mammograms for women over the age of 40, monthly self-breast examination, and yearly breast examination by a health care professional. There is some question about the value of mammography for the very old woman. Screening techniques and their value should be discussed with the woman’s health care provider.

Treatment of breast cancer includes a variety of options based on the stage of the disease. For localized tumors without metastasis, lumpectomy and radiation are often the treatments of choice. However, a growing number of women are choosing to have mastectomies to avoid the need for adjunct therapy and to decrease the chances of recurrence. Some women with unilateral breast cancer and some with a strong family history or the presence of genetic markers are choosing to have bilateral mastectomies to reduce their risk for developing the disease in the unaffected breast or to prevent the occurrence of the disease at all. Radiation and/or chemotherapy may also be part of the treatment regimen. Treatment options should be discussed at length with the woman’s health care team. Ultimately, she must make the choice (e.g. lumpectomy, mastectomy or even refusal to have surgery) herself. It is important that health care providers maintain an objective attitude. Breast cancer triggers not only fear of death but also the fear of disfigurement. Women are usually quite concerned with the cosmetic effects of breast cancer treatment. Reconstruction options should be presented to women undergoing mastectomy.

**Assessment tip:** Lymphedema is a potential complication of lymph node removal. The patient must be taught to exercise her arm(s) and hand(s) to avoid the development of this potentially debilitating complication.

**The musculoskeletal system**

The musculoskeletal system includes the bones, muscles, ligaments, bursae and joints. The bones or skeleton provides the form and support of the body. Muscles move the various body parts. Joints, the areas where two bones are attached, provide stability and facilitate mobility.

Changes in the musculoskeletal system may have adverse effects on mobility and decrease the independence of older adults. Normal age-related changes include:

- Decreased range of motion of some joints.
- Loss of bone mass.
- Loss of height.
- Joint degeneration.
- Arthritic changes of the joints.
- Problems maintaining balance.
- Problems with the feet, such as corns, bunions and calluses.
- Muscles atrophy.
- Bones become stiffer and brittle.

These changes increase the risk of the following problems.
Osteoporosis
Osteoporosis is a metabolic bone disorder and is the most common metabolic disease, affecting half of all women during their lifetimes. Although its occurrence is higher in women, men are also affected by the disease.9,24

Osteoporosis occurs when the rate of bone resorption increases while the rate of bone formation decreases, leading to a loss of bone mass. The exact cause is unknown, but prolonged negative calcium imbalance is probably a contributing factor. The most common presenting symptom is back pain. A loss of height is common, and the risk of fractures and falls is high.24

There is no cure for osteoporosis. The goals of treatment are to slow or prevent loss of bone, avoid fractures and reduce pain. Calcium and vitamin D supplements may also be recommended.9,24

Assistive devices such as walkers or canes may be used to provide stability when walking. Patients should be taught safety precautions and measures to avoid falls.

There are steps that can be taken to reduce the risk of osteoporosis. These steps may also be part of the treatment regimen for the disease. These steps include:24

- **Ingest adequate amounts of calcium and vitamin D.** Postmenopausal women and all women and men over the age of 65 should ingest 1,500 mg of calcium and at least 800 international units of vitamin D on a daily basis. Vitamin D is necessary for the absorption of calcium and enhances muscle strength. Some older adults may understand the need for calcium supplements but fail to realize the need for vitamin D. Patient education should include an explanation of the need for adequate amounts of calcium as well as vitamin D on a daily basis.

- **Alcohol intake should be limited.** Having more than two alcoholic drinks per day may decrease the formation of bone. Alcohol may also adversely affect the body’s ability to absorb calcium.

- **Limit the intake of caffeine.** No more than two to three cups of beverages containing caffeine should be consumed per day. Some patients may assume that caffeinated beverages means “coffee.” They should be taught that chocolate, cola, and teas also contain caffeine.

- **Participate in an appropriate exercise program.** Exercise helps to slow the rate of bone loss and increase bone strength. Weight-bearing exercises are important to help increase bone strength. Exercise programs should be designed and implemented under the supervision of the geriatric patient’s health care provider.

Osteoarthritis
Osteoarthritis is the most common form of arthritis. It is a chronic disease that causes deterioration of the cartilage of the joints and development of new bone at the joints. Symptoms often begin after the age of 40 and progress with age.24

Signs and symptoms include a deep, aching joint pain, morning stiffness, weather-related aching pain, joint instability and poor posture.24

Treatment is aimed at symptom relief and minimizing disability. Joint replacement surgery may be necessary. Assistive mobility devices and anti-inflammatory medications are also used.24

Falls
Falls are certainly not a disease condition. But they are a significant health problem of older adults. In fact, falls are the leading cause of death in persons over the age of 65.24 As age increases, so does the risk of falls and the death rate from falls.

Fall prevention is a key goal of gerontological nursing. Some tips to prevent falls include:

- Make sure patients wear glasses as needed.
- Assess the home environment for adequate lighting.
- Assess the home for safety. Remove small area and “scatter” rugs, which may cause the older adult to trip.
- Are there stairs in the older person’s home? If so, are there safety rails to support the older adult as he ascends and descends the stairs?
- Does the patient use assistive devices for mobility? If so, are they appropriate to the older adult’s needs? If he does not use such devices, does he need them?
- Is the older adult alert and oriented? If not, is there someone in the home to help him with safety issues?
- Does the adult get adequate amounts of sleep? Does he seem to be tired or fatigued?
- Lack of rest and/or fatigue or weakness increase the risk of falls.

**Assessment tip:** More than 95 percent of hip fractures are the result of falls. Hip fractures are associated with complications such as permanently decreased mobility and death.3

The immune system
The immune system is responsible for defending the body against infection. The immune system must recognize the normal components of the body and differentiate between these components and foreign substances that are potentially harmful. There are three types of immunity.

Natural immunity is “natural” to the body and not produced by an immune response (e.g., an immune response triggered by a vaccine). A human is born with natural immunity. Examples of natural immunity include immunity to diseases that affect animals but not humans. Natural passive immunity is natural immunity that comes as a mother’s antibodies cross the placental barrier to the fetus. This type of immunity is only temporary and generally lasts for the first three to six months of the infant’s life.24

Acquired active immunity occurs as a result of the body’s response to a foreign substance. For example, if a person has the mumps, his body responds by developing protection against future infections of the virus that causes mumps. Vaccines also cause the body to develop acquired active immunity. Booster vaccines may be necessary to maintain immunity.4,9

Acquired passive immunity is acquired when a serum that contains specific antibodies is given to a person who is vulnerable to a particular disease. For example, gamma globulin may be administered to prevent the development of hepatitis A.5

The components of the immune system include organs and tissues rich in lymphocytes. The two primary lymphocytes are B cells and T cells. These cells are found throughout the body, but are predominant in the lymph nodes and spleen. They possess receptors that respond to specific antigens.26 Antigens are substances (usually proteins) that are recognized by the body as foreign and can produce an immune response. This response involves producing antibodies to attack the foreign substance. Antibodies are specific to the antigens that trigger them.26

The older person’s immune system is not as effective as that of a younger person. However, exercise, diet and emotional well-being all contribute to boosting the immune system and enhancing health and wellness. Specific age-related immune system changes include:4,9

- Reduction in the rate and strength of the immune response.
- The number of available B cells decreases.
- The manufacture of antibodies that fail to differentiate between the person’s own body and foreign substances increases. This makes the older adult more vulnerable to autoimmune disease development.
- There is an overall decrease in cellular immunity.

As part of the assessment of the immune system, the nurse must recognize those factors that can have an impact on the immune system.

- First, as with most body systems, a person’s general state of health and wellness impacts the effectiveness of the immune system. A nutritious diet, adequate rest and relaxation, and social interaction with family and friends all contribute to good health. Patients should also be encouraged to have preventive screenings as recommended by their health care providers.

- Research suggests that the regular exercise may slow the rate or even prevent age-associated decline in the immune system. Benefits of regular exercise include reduced risk for infection, enhanced vaccine efficiency, increased rate of healing after infection and improvement in the performance of activities of daily living. Older adults may find that the practice of moderate, slow-movements, such as those performed in tai chi, a Chinese exercise of ancient origin, have a positive impact on cardiovascular and respiratory function as well as mental acuity, balance, muscle strength, flexibility and immune system response.24
Stress reduction is important to most, if not all, aspects of health. Stress related to living alone, the death of loved ones, financial concerns and/or concerns about dealing with chronic illness all may have an impact on health. Additionally, many older adults are providing caregiver services to a spouse or other elderly significant others. This, too, is a stressful situation. Stress can elevate heart and respiratory rates, blood pressure, and adversely affect emotional stability and ability to concentrate. It may also have a negative effect on the immune system. The relationship between stress and the effectiveness of the immune system is currently the focus of a number of research endeavors.

The effects of long-term and chronic illness can have an adverse effect on the ability of the immune system to function. Both physical and mental health problems can have a negative impact on the immune system. Since the immune system is interrelated with many other body systems, problems in one system can affect one or more other systems.

There are a number of diseases related to defective immune system responses. Here are some that are common in the elderly population.

### Hypersensitivity problems

Mrs. Slater is 68 years old. She recently retired from her job and is looking forward to spending more time with her family and friends. Mrs. Slater lives in Florida, where the climate allows her to spend time gardening year round. Mrs. Slater has a lengthy history of coughing and becoming slightly short of breath when working in her garden, especially in the spring, when her garden is in full bloom. She also sneezes and her eyes water. These symptoms, especially the cough and shortness of breath, have slowly, insidiously become worse with age. She has always attributed such symptoms to “allergies,” but at her husband’s insistence, she visits their family doctor for evaluation. Mrs. Slater is indeed allergic to some environmental substances, such as pollen, but she also has asthma, a frequently under-diagnosed problem in older adults.

Mrs. Slater’s situation illustrates what is referred to as a hypersensitivity problem. Hypersensitivity problems are excessive immune responses that occur when the immune system has an excessive response to various triggers.

Hypersensitivity disorders or responses are classified as type 1 through type IV. Classification depends on which immune system activity causes tissue damage. A hypersensitivity response does not usually occur with the first exposure to the antigen that eventually causes a symptomatic response. As the body encounters the antigens on a recurring basis, the excessive immune response results in hypersensitivity reactions.

### Type 1 hypersensitivity disorders

Type 1 hypersensitivity disorders are immediate, usually occurring within 15 to 30 minutes after the person is exposed to an antigen (or allergen). These disorders are referred to as anaphylactic, immediate, atopic or IgE-mediated reactions. Sometimes, as in the case of anaphylactic reactions, the type 1 hypersensitivity reaction may be lifethreatening. Other examples include reactions to insect stings, food and drug reactions, and some cases of urticaria (hives). 

**Assessment tip:** Asthma is a common type 1 hypersensitivity reaction that is often both under-diagnosed and under-treated in older adults.

### Type II hypersensitivity disorders

Type II hypersensitivity disorders are referred to as cytotoxic, cytolysis or complement-dependent cytotoxicity reactions. They also occur within 15 to 30 minutes of exposure and include such problems as transfusion reactions, drug reactions and autoimmune hemolytic anemia.

### Type III hypersensitivity disorders

Type III hypersensitivity disorders are referred to as immune complex disease reactions. They are characterized by the body’s failure to remove antigen-antibody complexes from the circulation and tissues. Examples of type III disorders include reactions that are associated with infections such as hepatitis B and bacterial endocarditis, cancers, and autoimmune disorders such as systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE).

**Rheumatoid arthritis also is thought to be a type III disorder that affects older adults.**

### Type IV hypersensitivity disorders

Type IV hypersensitivity disorders are referred to as delayed or cell-mediated hypersensitivity reactions.

Tissue damage occurs due to a delayed T-cell reaction to an antigen. Reactions after exposure take place within one day to two weeks, but may be even slower in older adults.

Examples of type IV hypersensitivity disorders include dermatitis from a latex allergy, sarcoidosis, tuberculosis reactions and transplant rejections.

### Immunodeficiency disorders

Mr. St. John is a 75-year-old retired construction worker who is infected with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). His infection has been traced to a blood transfusion Mr. St. John received many years ago. He has difficulty dealing with the disorder and says he is “ashamed.” He is doing well on his treatment regimen, and his wife of 50 years is supportive. But Mr. St. John needs help dealing not only with the physical components of HIV infection but with its emotional consequences as well.

Infection with HIV is often underreported and under-diagnosed in the elderly population. Although the average age of patients who are first identified as HIV positive is progressively increasing, both older adults and some health care workers seem to lack knowledge about the potential for HIV infection in the elderly population. Older persons who have had multiple sexual partners in their youth continue to have multiple partners as they age. Unfortunately, many older adults have unprotected sex, believing that since the risk of pregnancy is no longer an issue among older couples, there is no need for protection.

The rates of sexually transmitted disease are increasing among persons who live in retirement communities. This also includes an increase in the incidence of HIV infection in this population.

When HIV was first recognized as a serious health problem, the primary means of transmission of the virus in older adults was via blood transfusion. But today, the risk of infection seems to be primarily due to intravenous drug use and sexual activities. As a result of the increasing incidence of HIV infection, the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends that routine HIV testing should be initiated in all health care settings for persons between the ages of 13 to 64.

**Assessment tip:** When assessing the health status of an older adult, the nurse should provide patient education regarding sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV. Such education is often automatic when working with younger patients. Age should not preclude the nurse from offering this type of education to her geriatric patients.

### Vulnerability to infections in the older adult

As the immune system undergoes age-related changes that reduce its effectiveness, nurses need to be aware that older patients are at increased risk of infection. This risk includes viral infections such as influenza; bacterial infections, such as pneumonia; and infections following surgery or other open wounds. Even a slight laceration may result in a serious infection.

Because of its prevalence, it is appropriate to discuss pneumonia as a problem of particular concern among the elderly. The prognosis is generally good for persons with normal respiratory function and intact immune systems. However, among the elderly, who may have a compromised immune system or are dealing with chronic disease or disorders, pneumonia is a leading cause of death in people over the age of 65. Not only is it the most common hospital-acquired infection (nosocomial infection), but it also has the highest mortality rate of such infections.

To add to the problem of pneumonia among older adults, the signs and symptoms of the disease in this population are often atypical. The cardinal signs of fever, chest pain, chills and shortness of breath may be subtle and not obviously apparent. Persons over the age of 65 are urged to receive pneumococcal vaccine.

**Assessment tip:** Older adults who live alone in the community seem to be at particular risk for not being diagnosed until pneumonia has reached an advanced stage. This could be that the symptoms are so subtle that the patient may assume he has a cold or simple viral infection. Teach older patients to be aware of the prevalence of pneumonia and to recognize the signs and symptoms as they appear in the...
older population. When possible, teach family members, friends and caregivers about the signs and symptoms that indicate pneumonia. The earlier the disease is recognized, the more prompt and effective the treatment.

### Summary

Nurses working with geriatric patients have unique opportunities to promote health and wellness throughout a long and hopefully productive life span. Although basic assessment techniques of interview, observation, auscultation, percussion, and palpation are similar for all age groups, the unique aspects of geriatric assessment require that the nurse have an in-depth understanding of how the body ages and a respect for older patients and their wealth of life experiences.

Nurses also have unique opportunities to teach their colleagues about the older population and to dispel myths about this age group. All health care professionals should understand that “old” does not equate with “sick.” Most older adults live independently and enjoy their lives. Too many people believe that older adults are inactive physically, mentally and sexually. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The people in this age group deserve the respect and support of the health care profession. They also deserve the opportunity to access health care services provided by professionals who understand how the body ages and want to serve as advocates for older adults. Work with your older patients to not only promote their health and well-being, but to also promote community awareness of the contributions older adults have made, and can continue to make, to their families, friends and communities.

### References


### Test Questions

**GERIATRIC ASSESSMENT**

**Self Evaluation Exercises**

Choose True or False for questions 1 through 10 and check your answers at the bottom of the page.

You do not need to submit this self-evaluation exercise with your participant sheet.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>True</th>
<th>False</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. According to the World Health Organization, the fastest-growing segment of people over 65 are those 80 years of age and older.</td>
<td>True</td>
<td>False</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Members of the traditional generation prefer a more informal environment and prefer that young health care providers automatically address them by their first names.</td>
<td>True</td>
<td>False</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. A frequent complication of dry mouth in the older adult is the fungal infection oral candidiasis, more commonly known as thrush.</td>
<td>True</td>
<td>False</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. As the body ages, there is as much as a 15 percent decrease in water content and an increase in body fat. The extra fat means that the effects of fat-soluble drugs may be increased.</td>
<td>True</td>
<td>False</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. When assessing the sleep patterns of older adults it is important to know what medications they are taking. Advise them to take antidepressants such as Zoloft that have a sedating effect in the evening.</td>
<td>True</td>
<td>False</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Your first clue to depression in older adults may be the reporting of somatic complaints.</td>
<td>True</td>
<td>False</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Persons who commit sex abuse are more likely to be women.</td>
<td>True</td>
<td>False</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. A normal finding when assessing the skin of an older adult is the presence of a multicolored lesion with nodules and irregular black outline.</td>
<td>True</td>
<td>False</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Answers:**
