

late-onset depression & chronic medical conditions

Adults with no previous history of depression can develop it late in life due to changes and losses they experience. Late-onset depression often occurs simultaneously with a chronic medical condition, happening for the first time at age 65 or older. Late-onset depression can develop due to physical limitations, decreased independence and the interruption of social networks that accompany a chronic medical condition or the onset of a new medical condition; or the depression can contribute to the development of the medical condition. For example, coronary artery disease is a risk factor for depression; while having depression can put you at risk for developing coronary artery disease.

Depression is not a normal part of aging, but it is often not viewed as an actual medical issue. When seniors experience depression and a chronic medical condition together, the depression can aggravate the condition and interfere with successful treatment. The coexistence of major depression with chronic conditions is associated with more physician visits, emergency department visits, days spent in bed because of illness, and functional disability.

“Caregivers of seniors who have never previously experienced depression, and especially those who have been diagnosed with a new chronic medical condition, should be alert to the warning signs of depression”, says Connie Duncan, RN, BSN, Behavioral Health Manager with THE MEDICAL TEAM. Medical conditions which cause depression can include

coronary artery disease, chronic lung disease, cancer, chronic pain, diabetes, macular degeneration, sleep disorders, stroke and neurodegenerative disorders such as Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s diseases. As many as one-third of individuals with a serious medical condition may experience symptoms of depression. For example, major depression occurs in more than half of patients within 6 months following a stroke; 20 percent of patients with Parkinson’s disease will experience a major depressive episode.

Older adults can be less inclined to acknowledge depression and may show less obvious symptoms. Many times they accept depression as part of aging when it is not. Signs and symptoms can include:

- Persistent sad, anxious or empty feelings
- Feelings of hopelessness, guilt or helplessness
- Irritability and restlessness
- Loss of interest in activities
- Fatigue
- Difficulty concentrating
- Insomnia or excessive sleeping
- Overeating or appetite loss
- Thoughts of suicide or suicide attempts

“Depression is often neglected when the focus is on treating a senior’s chronic medical condition but treating the depression could significantly improve quality of life,” added Duncan. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, only about 10 percent of seniors suffering from depression receive treatment. When untreated, depression leads to poor quality of life, decreased ability to live

independently and an increased burden on caregivers.

Studies show that the majority of older adults with depression respond well when they receive treatment, which can include an antidepressant, psychotherapy or both. A Pittsburgh Medical Center study found that 80 percent of seniors treated over a three-year period didn’t suffer recurrent bouts, while only 10 percent of those without treatment avoided relapse.

There are treatment programs such as THE MEDICAL TEAM’s Journey Behavioral Health Program which can help patients and their caregivers in the comfort and familiarity of home. These programs provide services and supports tailored to the needs of individuals with a behavioral health diagnosis and can help them better manage their chronic medical conditions and cope with issues that may affect their ability to care for themselves.

“Depression shouldn’t be considered an inevitable outcome of chronic medical conditions and aging,” reminded Duncan. If you or a loved one might be suffering from depression, talk with your doctor about treatment options. [GRL](#)

Resources

“Depression and Coronary Artery Disease,” <http://circ.ahajournals.org/cgi/content/full/118/17/1768>

“Chronic Illnesses and Depression,” http://my.clevelandclinic.org/disorders/depression/hic_chronic_illness_and_depression.aspx

“Late-Onset Depression,” <http://emedicine.medscape.com/article/1356106-overview>

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