



Common Senior Health Problems

As people age, they can experience various health problems including chronic diseases. A chronic disease has one or more of the following characteristics:

- It is permanent and leaves a disability
- It is not reversible
- It requires special rehabilitative training
- It may require a long period of supervision, observation or care



Arthritis

Arthritis is inflammation of the joints due to cartilage breaking down. The joints that are affected most often in women are the hands, knees, ankles and feet. In men they are the hips, spine and wrist. There are two main types of arthritis:

- **Osteoarthritis** – degenerative joint disease where cartilage breaks down and bones rub together. There is no cure but treatment/prevention options include: application of cold or heat, relieving stiffness/pain, weight loss or an assistive device to carry out activities of daily living.



Arthritis

- **Rheumatoid Arthritis** – the immune system attacks the lining of the joint causing inflammation which can result in deformity. It can involve not only joints but also the heart, lungs, kidneys, skin and eyes. Treatment/Prevention options include maintaining joint motion, range of motion exercises, medications and surgical joint replacement.



Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is a disease wherein there is an accelerated loss of bone mass and a reduction in bone quality. If not prevented or if left untreated, it can progress painlessly until a bone breaks, usually in the hip, spine and/or wrist.

Treatment options include: eating a calcium rich diet, taking enough vitamin D, do weight bearing exercises, estrogen replacement therapy and/or wearing a back brace or corset – the latter two to be determined by a physician.



Stroke

A stroke occurs when the supply of blood and oxygen to the brain is interrupted. It can be caused by a blood vessel breaking, bleeding into the brain or it can be caused by a blood clot blocking the blood supply to the brain. Whichever type of stroke it is, the death of brain cells may occur. When this happens the parts of the body, which the dead cells once controlled, do not function.

Treatments/Prevention include: medications, rehabilitation, regular physical activity, eating a high fiber, low salt and low fat diet and surgery.



Parkinson's Disease

Parkinson's Disease is a progressive neurological condition. The cells in the part of the brain, which control movement, are damaged. The rate of progression and the symptoms of the disease vary considerably from individual to individual.

Treatment includes the following: medication, surgical techniques, physical therapy and exercise.

The home care assistant should always treat clients as adults and give them dignity and respect regardless of their symptoms or consequences of their disease.



Respiratory Conditions

The respiratory system brings oxygen into the lungs and expels carbon dioxide. When this function is interfered with, a person is said to have a chronic obstructive lung disease. Treatment options include: quit smoking, medications, inhalers, oxygen therapy and surgery.

There are three main types of chronic obstructive lung disease:

- **Chronic Bronchitis** – inflammation of the air passages (bronchi) which connect the windpipe with the sacs of the lungs. This results in excessive mucous production and swelling of the bronchial walls.



Respiratory Conditions

- **Emphysema** – a disease in which there is destruction of the walls of the air sacs of the lung. It is frequently preceded by chronic bronchitis.
- **Asthma** – inflammation of the lower airways, which obstructs air flow. It is characterized by wheezing, coughing, chest pain and chest tightening. Often it is allergy related.



Oxygen Guidelines

Important things to remember when working around oxygen:

- Never smoke or allow others to smoke when oxygen is in use
- Keep flammable objects away from oxygen
- Don not leave oxygen cords lying around in places where people can trip over them
- Do not use an extension cord to plug in oxygen
- Store oxygen containers in an upright position – don't let them fall horizontally



Paralysis

Paralysis is a complete loss of movement in an affected limb or muscle group. While it can affect a single body part, it usually affects an entire body region. The types of paralysis are classified by region:

- Monoplegia – affects only one limb
- Diplegia – affects the same body region on both sides (e.g. both arms)
- Hemiplegia – affects one side of the body
- Paraplegia – affects both legs and the trunk
- Quadraplegia – affects all four limbs and the trunk



Eye Problems

Vision can be affected at any age. Sight problems may develop suddenly or they can evolve over a period of years. Two of the more common eye disorders that affect seniors are:

- **Glaucoma** – disease of the eye marked by increased pressure within the eyeball. If left untreated, glaucoma can damage the optic nerve and cause vision loss.
- **Cataract** – clouding of the lens of the eye. The majority of cataracts are related to age and take years to develop. If left untreated, cataracts will eventually cause blindness.



Ear Problems

The two primary functions of the ear are hearing and balance. Many people experience some hearing loss as they age and it ranges from mild to total deafness. Common ear problems found in seniors are:

- **Hearing Loss** – some treatment options include hearing aids when hearing loss is a result of nerve damage or medical treatment which is used for most other types of hearing loss (e.g. surgery or medication).

Be aware that hearing loss is a debilitating condition and can affect seniors' relationships, social involvement, emotional stability and communication. Encourage seniors to seek medical attention quickly if an ear infection is suspected. Be cautious of the senior's tendency to lose balance and be ready to provide immediate assistance.



Ear Problems

Meniere's Disease – disorder of the inner ear which affects balance and hearing. It is characterized by dizziness, loss of hearing in one or both ears and ringing in the ear.

There is no known cure but treatment is focused on treating the symptoms and lowering the pressure in the middle ear (e.g. medications, surgery and/or hearing aid).



Summary

Aging brings with it a series of chronic conditions such as arthritis, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease and nervous system disorders. While chronic problems are not usually life threatening, they do affect lifestyle, functionality and sense of purpose.

By being supportive and knowledgeable about the causes, symptoms and treatment of these conditions/diseases, home care assistants can help their clients cope and ease into their golden years with as little stress as possible.