



Senior Surgical Care Program

Geriatric Syndromes



Age-related health conditions can reduce quality of life and make it more difficult for older adults to live independently. Sometimes, surgery can cause these complications or make existing symptoms worse. Geriatric syndromes are problems that may have more than one cause and involve many parts of the body. The most common are functional decline (decreased physical or memory ability), falls, delirium, and malnutrition.

This brochure on geriatric syndromes can help you or someone you're caring for:

- Avoid the risk of medical complications and injury, such as a fall.
- Maintain function and independence.
- Maintain good quality of life.

Functional Decline

Functional decline makes it more difficult to care for yourself, move around safely, and participate in regular daily activities.

People with certain risk factors are more likely to experience a decline in function. These include:

- Problems with thinking, learning, and/or memory.
- Depression.
- Chronic medical conditions.
- Very underweight or overweight.
- Reduced ability to use the legs.
- Too much time spent alone.
- Reduced physical activity.

To help prevent functional decline after surgery:

- Use eyeglasses, contacts, and hearing aids as you normally would.
- Be as physically active as possible. Avoid staying in bed for long periods of time.
- Move safely. Wear shoes or socks with nonskid soles to prevent falls. Use a walker or cane, if needed.
- Do your physical therapy exercises regularly each morning, afternoon, and evening to keep your

body strong. These exercises can be done in bed or while seated.

- Sit up in a chair during meals, television shows, and visits with family and friends.
- Get back to doing things as you normally would. Sit in a chair to read a book, stand at the sink to brush your teeth, and walk to the bathroom.

Falls

A fall can cause serious disability in older adults. Most falls happen at home and can cause fractures, head injuries, and major lacerations.

You're more likely to fall if you've experienced:

- A previous fall.
- Leg weakness.
- Memory problems.
- Balance and gait problems.
- Arthritis.
- Stroke.
- Dizziness (due to medications).
- Anemia.

To prevent falls:

- Be physically active to maintain strength and good balance.
- Wear shoes or socks with nonskid soles. Don't walk around with bare feet.
- Maintain a clear path through each room. Remove clutter and unneeded furniture and keep wiring and cords out of the way.
- Remove or fix rugs to the floor with double-sided tape or nonslip backing.

- Maintain lights in hallways and bathrooms.
- Install handrails and shower chairs/benches for safety with stairs and washing.
- Avoid uneven surfaces or unsafe sidewalks or stairs.

Delirium

Delirium is sudden confusion and disorientation. You may not make sense or appear paranoid. This is common in older adults after surgery. The change happens very quickly, sometimes in just a few hours.

You're more likely to develop delirium if you have these risk factors:

- Recent surgery.
- Advanced age (65 or older).
- Poor eyesight or hearing.
- Dementia.
- Immobility.
- Severe illness or infection.
- Drug or alcohol withdrawal.
- Dehydration or electrolyte imbalance.
- Pain.

To help prevent delirium after surgery:

- Be as active as possible.
- Participate in your regular activities as much as you can. Wear hearing aids, eyeglasses, contacts, and dentures so you can interact and eat normally.
- Sit up in a chair when eating, watching TV, and visiting with family and friends.
- Stick to your normal sleep schedule. Keep your bedroom quiet and dark.
- Talk to your doctor about medications that may affect your ability to think and remember.

When caring for someone with delirium:

- Speak softly.
- Use a soothing voice.
- Face them when talking.
- Talk about events from the past.
- Surround them with familiar objects or pictures.
- Try not to argue or correct them if they're confused. Provide comfort and reassurance, for example, "You sound angry, scared, or sad. I'm here to keep you safe."

Malnutrition

Older adults can become malnourished if they don't eat enough calories. Sometimes it can take time for your appetite to return after surgery.

Malnutrition can result from:

- Teeth and gum problems. This makes it painful to eat.
- Loss of appetite.
- Difficulty self-feeding.
- Difficulty swallowing.
- Infections.

To prevent malnutrition:

- Eat a variety of foods.
- Eat lots of fruits and vegetables, such as collard greens and kale (consult with your doctor if on blood thinners).
- Include foods high in vitamin B12 in your diet. This can include fortified breakfast cereal, nonfat or low-fat milk and other dairy products, meat, poultry, fish, and eggs.
- Talk to your doctor if you're vegan, vegetarian, or follow a specific diet. Your doctor may refer you to a nutritionist to ensure you're getting all the nutrients you need.
- Get enough calcium and vitamin D from nonfat or low-fat milk, cheese, and yogurt. Other sources include tofu and orange juice with added calcium.
- Eat protein, including lean meat, fish, poultry, eggs, and cheese.
- Choose whole grains, such as whole-wheat bread, whole-grain cereals, brown rice, and other whole grains.

Additional Resources

For more information, visit:

- kp.org/socialhealth (community resources)
- kpdoc.org/preventfalls
- healthinaging.org



This information is not intended to diagnose or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor. If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist. Kaiser Permanente does not endorse the medications or products mentioned.