

## Aging



Older adults with developmental disabilities are a diverse group with varied cognitive, mobility, communication, and sensory abilities. Despite sharing many age-related concerns with other older adults, individuals with developmental disabilities age earlier than their peers in the general population, heightening the role of earlier assessment and identification of potential problems. Older adults with developmental disabilities may differ in their desire to retire, and may experience a variety of changes in their medical, psychiatric, and psychosocial well-being. They often encounter challenges in their living environments.

While it is important for caregivers to be aware of the possibility of age-related changes occurring, it is equally as important to be aware that some changes may have reversible causes and may *not* be due to the normal aging process.

In this issue we address several issues associated with aging: supports for people as they age, memory, dementia, Alzheimer's disease, Down syndrome, osteoporosis, falls, women's issues, assistive technology, and prevention.

### Supports for People as They Age

All aspects of a person's life need to be considered to identify aging-related problems. Appropriate primary care, mental health care, supports for performing activities of daily living, and social support are essential.

Helpful supports for people as they are aging include:

- Early and repeated assessments such as therapeutic, behavioral, eating and swallowing, vision and hearing exams.
- Pain evaluations. Don't assume pain is attributed only to aging.
- Focused planning efforts that include family and caregiver training on age-related issues.
- Efforts that promote "aging in place" including flexibility, personal choice, and access to options, such as assistive living and hospice, without regard to developmental disability.
- Modifications to physical environments as needed.

- Availability of routine health care: Pap smear, mammography, TSH screening, bone density scan, vaccines for influenza and pneumonia, to name a few.
- Medication monitoring. People who are aging may be uniquely sensitive to medications. Health care professionals need to be aware of the person's medication regimen. Caregivers should know the purpose of each medication, instructions for administration, and potential side effects (e.g., some medications interfere with absorption of vitamins and minerals).
- Use of natural and specialized community supports. For example, integration into existing senior citizen's programs may be preferable to programs exclusively for people with developmental disabilities.



### MEMORY AND DEMENTIA

One of the greatest concerns for people as they age is the ability to think and remember. In many cases, symptoms are caused by a passing, treatable condition such as depression, sensory impairment, hypothyroidism, infection, or medication side effects. A careful history, physical evaluation, environmental assessment, and mental status examination are important when investigating any decline in skills or changes in mental status and for determining an effective plan of care. Family members and other caregivers should be aware of the person's typical functioning and identify changes



Dementia involves a loss of memory and deterioration of mental abilities, judgment, work skills, activities of daily living skills, and orientation. Dementia involves marked changes in a person's behavior such as sleep patterns and eating habits, impaired concentration, anxiety, decreased speech, and onset or increase of aggression. A person with dementia may no longer be able to name objects they could previously name (e.g., hairbrush) or to perform known motor tasks (e.g., wave good-bye). They may have increased difficulty planning and sequencing activities such as following two-step directions. In addition, psychiatric symptoms such as delusions and hallucinations may emerge.

### Alzheimer's Disease

Alzheimer's disease is a disorder marked by a gradual decline in memory and brain function that worsens with time. A person with Alzheimer's disease may be unable to recognize familiar individuals or identify common objects, may exhibit disturbances in planning, organizing, and sequencing, and may show a decline in performance of activities of daily living.

In general, people with developmental disabilities are at no greater risk for developing Alzheimer's disease than anyone else in the population. There is, however, an increased risk if any of the following are present.

- The person has Down syndrome and is over 40 years old.
- The person has experienced serious head trauma.
- The person has family history of Alzheimer's disease.

The Alzheimer's Association at [www.alz.org](http://www.alz.org) offers a wealth of information regarding this disease. In addition, suggestions for care giving are included in Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders: A Guide for Caregivers available at [www.aasa.dshs.wa.gov/Library/2-450\\_Alzh.pdf](http://www.aasa.dshs.wa.gov/Library/2-450_Alzh.pdf).

Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders

A Guide for Caregivers



## DOWN SYNDROME

Research has indicated that sensory, cognitive, and adaptive skill losses may occur earlier for adults with Down syndrome as compared to other adults with developmental disabilities or to adults in the general population. There appears to be a higher prevalence of Alzheimer disease in adults with Down syndrome. In addition, as for all aging adults, symptoms of dementia may be caused by other conditions such as hypo/hyperthyroidism, depression, and sensory impairments.

Results of studies of adults with Down syndrome have shown that late-onset seizures and sensory problems are common among adults affected by dementia.

Individuals providing supports to people with Down syndrome should be aware that age-related concerns may occur at an earlier age than with people who do not have Down syndrome. Routine medical care, including attention to heart-related conditions, should be provided and any age-related concerns should be discussed with the health care provider.

## Assistive Technology

Many older adults are increasingly utilizing assistive technology to prolong active participation in daily activities. Adaptive mobility devices, hearing aids, signaling systems, modified telephones and door bells, visual aids, and cooking or gardening utensils with easy-grip handles can help reduce dependency on others. Caregivers should consult health care professionals, therapists, or Regional Center service coordinators for ideas about available technology.



## Osteoporosis

Osteoporosis is a disease in which bones become fragile and prone to fracture. Women with developmental disabilities may be at greater risk for osteoporosis and related bone fractures but men can also have osteoporosis.

Risk factors for osteoporosis include the following:

- *advanced age*
- *family history*
- *caucasian or Asian ethnicity*
- *thin or small stature*
- *physical inactivity or conditions that limit movement, such as cerebral palsy*
- *post-menopause*
- *diet low in calcium or vitamin D*
- *high alcohol and/or caffeine intake*
- *excessive dieting and/or excessive weight loss*
- *smoking*

People who have several of these risk factors may need a special bone density scan to determine the presence of osteoporosis and the rate of bone loss.

Because bone loss takes place over time, an adequate intake of calcium and vitamins is needed. Dairy products, dark green leafy vegetables, broccoli, salmon, cheese, sardines, and tofu are high in calcium. Some foods, like orange juice and cereals, may have calcium added.

## Falls

Falls can be a major cause of injury as people age. Bruises and fractures take longer to heal as one ages. To guard against falls:

- Make sure the home is well lit.
- Tack down rugs and carpets.
- Keep stairways and passages clear.
- Do not store things higher than eye level.
- Keep a small light on at night to avoid accidents.
- Install hand-grips around tubs, showers, and beds as needed.
- Provide mobility assistance and support as needed.

## Women's Issues

Women with developmental disabilities may not receive information about aging or menopause. While some women barely notice any changes related to menopause, others may experience hot flashes, sweating, insomnia, heart palpitations, itchy skin, backaches, weight changes, or changes in seizure patterns. Changes in mood, behavioral or mental health may be noticed.

It is important to inform women about changes they may experience during menopause and for caregivers to be alert to possible changes. Periodic evaluations, including a mammogram and pap smear should be provided.

## Prevention

The golden years bring higher risks of diseases like arthritis, obesity, diabetes, heart disease and cancer. If you, or a person you care for, are getting older, take the following steps to decrease risks associated with aging.

- **Eat a healthy diet.** Both obesity and malnutrition are common problems for older people.
- **Exercise** at least three days a week. An instructor or therapist may be able to recommend areas of concentration to increase strength, endurance and flexibility. Weight-bearing activities, such as walking, can help improve bone density and maintain general health.
- **Rest** when you get tired or your body hurts.
- **Keep your mind active.** Learning new hobbies, playing games, and exploring new places are just some examples.
- **Don't smoke.** Cigarette smoking is a leading preventable cause of major health problems in older adults.
- **Use devices** and other supports to assist you in doing the things you enjoy.

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Resource information for this newsletter was provided by: Facts about Older Adults with Developmental Disabilities and Their Aging Family Caregivers (Heller and Factor); Prevalence of Dementia and Impact on Intellectual Disability Services (Janicki and Dalton, 2000); Aging with Developmental Disabilities: Women's Health Issues (Brown); The Wellness Guide, University of California, Berkeley, 1999; The Safety Net; Promoting Choices and Options in the Community for Older Adults with Developmental Disabilities (Factor and Preston); The Identification and Evaluation of Best Practice Assistive Technology and Universal Design Solutions and Services for Older Adults with Mental Retardation (Hammel, Nochajski, Heller, Hedman, & Mann); Later-Life Planning: Promoting Knowledge of Options and Choice-Making (Heller, Miller, Hsieh, and Sterns); Alzheimer's Disease and Related Disorders: A Guide for Caregivers (Washington State Department of Social and Health Services); Robert J. Pary, M.D. and Carl V. Tyler, M.D., presentations for Special Services Alliance, Regional Center of the East Bay, [ddssafety.net](http://ddssafety.net).