

Geriatric Assessment

If you or your loved one are experiencing changes in physical, psychological, or social functioning, a comprehensive assessment by a team of specialists may be in order. Many hospitals have developed "geriatric assessment units" or "geriatric consultation services" to address all aspects of an older person's health and life.

- Geriatric assessment units may include geriatricians, neurologists (specialists who treat disorders of the brain, spinal cord, and nervous system), psychiatrists, social workers, nurses and other health care professionals.
- Geriatric consultation services generally include a geriatrician, and a clinical nurse and/or social worker specialist.

Geriatric assessments are helpful for older adults who want to improve their ability to function and have experienced one or more of the following conditions:

- A decline in functional ability including weakness, frequent falls and difficulty performing daily tasks
- Appetite or weight changes
- Changes in personality, behavior, mood or memory
- Difficulty managing independently in the community with concerns about safety
- A need for frequent hospitalizations
- Medical treatment which requires four or more medications
- Complex or multiple medical problems that require an interdisciplinary approach

Assessments routinely include physical, neurological, and mental exams, as well as evaluations by social workers and/or nurses.

- A detailed history of a patient's physical health, as well as a physical examination, with an emphasis on common age-related impairments and difficulties with mobility.
- Evaluation of a patient's social supports, including family and other potential caregivers, and review of economic resources that can influence options for living arrangements and support services.
- An analysis of an older person's ability to function in terms of basic activities such as bathing, dressing and eating, as well as more complex tasks including meal preparation, financial management, medication management, and the use of a telephone and transportation.

Patients receive comprehensive evaluations aimed at diagnosing their disorder and assessing their emotional, behavioral and cognitive abilities. Thorough psychosocial evaluations, neuropsychological testing, review of medications, medical history and current physical conditions, and other diagnostic procedures are provided as needed.

The team identifies problems, develops a plan of treatment and care, and provides advice about managing the problem. After the initial assessment, the team generates a comprehensive list of the patient's needs and strengths, usually at a multidisciplinary case conference. Treatment options may include individual and group therapy, psychopharmacology, occupational therapy and behavioral interventions. The staff provides families with education support and help in determining the most appropriate next steps, including recommendations of community-based

services when appropriate. Recommendations are integrated into an individualized plan of interventions and desired outcomes. The preferences of the patient and family must be carefully considered at this stage in the process. Periodic reassessment and appropriate modification of the care plan are central elements of the process of comprehensive geriatric assessment.

People are often referred for a geriatric assessment by their personal physicians, but you or your family member can make an appointment directly. If you belong to a Medicare+Choice HMO, you will need a referral from your primary care physician.

Medicare and most third party payers cover the cost of geriatric assessments at hospitals and in physicians' offices. It would be wise to check first with the program. For more information about geriatric assessment resources in this area, call Kathy Laufer, LICSW at the Newton Senior Center (617) 796-1660.

