Dementia Prevalence in Sexual Minority Older Adults

The first dementia prevalence data from a large population of lesbian, gay, and bisexual older adults was reported at the 2018 Alzheimer’s Association International Conference in Chicago. Researchers examined prevalence of dementia among 3,718 sexual minority adults ages ≥60 who participated in the Kaiser Permanente Research Program on Genes, Environment, and Health. Dementia diagnoses were collected from medical records. Over 9 years of follow up, the overall crude prevalence of dementia was 7.4% for sexual minority older adults in this study population. For comparison, Alzheimer’s Association 2018 Alzheimer’s Disease Facts and Figures reports U.S. prevalence of Alzheimer’s disease dementia and other dementias at approximately 10%.


Repeated Assessments May Obscure Signs of Cognitive Decline

An article published online in Alzheimer’s & Dementia: Diagnosis, Assessment, & Disease Monitoring found that repeated cognitive assessments of middle-aged men produced a practice effect that obscured true cognitive decline and delayed detection of mild cognitive impairment (MCI).

Researchers retested 995 middle- to late-middle-aged men in a 6-year follow up of the Vietnam Era Twin Study of Aging. Researchers found that there were significant practice effects in most cognitive domains, and diagnoses of MCI doubled from 4.5% to 9% after correcting for practice effects. Thus, some men would have declined to levels indicating impairment on follow-up testing had they not been previously exposed to the tests.


Storytelling and Poetry May Lower Risk of Delirium in Hospitalized Older Adults

Performing arts programs that include storytelling and poetry may be beneficial in lowering the risk of developing delirium in hospitalized patients, according to a study published in Innovation in Aging. The study is the first to evaluate the association between a bedside storytelling intervention delivered by artists-in-residence and changes in measures of cognitive dysfunction in hospitalized older adults.

The pilot study of 50 patients ages ≥65 was conducted at UAB Hospital–Highlands in 2016. Two artists-in-residence visited patients once for 15 minutes of bedside storytelling or poetry during their hospital stay. Patients were asked if they would like to hear a story or poem, and could choose the type, whether it be religious, humorous, a folk or fairy tale, or a legend or myth. The session was designed to be interactive, with patients having the opportunity to reflect on the story or poem and share stories from their lives.

The storytelling/poetry experience was associated with a lower delirium score at discharge. The result remained significant after adjusting for age, baseline cognitive impairment, and general well-being.

Loss of Muscle and Function in Throat May Lead to Swallowing Difficulties in Older Adults

As adults age, they experience a natural loss of muscle mass and function. A study found that as loss of muscle and function in the throat occurs, efficient constriction while swallowing becomes more difficult, which leads to an increased chance of food and liquids remaining in the throat.

Among other health issues, swallowing difficulties—which affect 15% of older adults—can lead to malnutrition, dehydration, and pneumonia from food and drinks being misdirected into the lungs. Swallowing difficulties can also have a financial impact. Other studies have demonstrated that when patients with dysphagia are admitted to the hospital, they normally experience a 40% longer length of stay than those without dysphagia—estimated to cost more than $500 million per year.


Exposure to General Anesthesia and Surgery Associated With Subtle Cognitive Decline

In adults older than 70, exposure to general anesthesia and surgery is associated with a subtle decline in memory and thinking skills, according to new Mayo Clinic research. A study published in the British Journal of Anesthesia analyzed approximately 2,000 participants in the Mayo Clinic Study of Aging and found that exposure to anesthesia after age 70 was linked to long-term changes in brain function.

Although the decline in brain function was small, it could be meaningful for individuals with already low cognitive function or pre-existing mild cognitive impairment who are considering surgery with general anesthesia. In older adults with borderline cognitive reserve that is not clinically obvious, exposure to anesthesia and surgery may unmask underlying problems with memory and thinking.

Researchers used resources from the Mayo Clinic Study of Aging to conduct the study. Participants in Olmsted County, Minnesota, underwent cognitive assessments at approximately 15-month intervals. The group included 1,819 participants between ages 70 and 89 at the time of study enrollment. Researchers analyzed whether exposure to surgery and anesthesia during the period 20 years before enrollment was associated with cognitive decline and whether exposure to anesthesia after study enrollment was associated with cognitive change. Whereas older adults often experience cognitive decline associated as part of the normal aging process, decline following exposure to anesthesia and surgery was found to be slightly accelerated beyond that associated with normal aging.


High Blood Pressure Associated with Brain Lesions in Older Adults

Older adults with higher blood pressure may have more signs of brain disease, specifically brain lesions, according to a study published in Neurology®. Researchers also found a link between higher blood pressure and more markers of Alzheimer’s disease tangles in the brain. For the study, 1,288 older adults were followed until they died, which was an average of 8 years later. Average age of death was 89.

Blood pressure was documented yearly for each participant and autopsies were conducted on their brains after death. Average systolic blood pressure for those enrolled in the study was 134 mmHg and average diastolic blood pressure was 71 mmHg. Two thirds of participants had a history of high blood pressure, and 87% were taking high blood pressure medication. A total of 48% of participants had one or more brain infarct lesions.

Researchers found that the risk of brain lesions was higher in individuals with higher average systolic blood pressure across the years. For an individual with one standard deviation above the average systolic blood pressure, there was a 46% increased risk of having one or more brain lesions, specifically infarcts. In addition, these individuals had a 46% greater chance of having large lesions and a 36% greater risk of very small lesions.

Separately, higher average diastolic blood pressure was also related to brain infarct lesions. Individuals with an increase of one standard deviation from average diastolic blood pressure had a 28% greater risk of lesions. Results did not change when researchers controlled for other factors that could affect the risk of brain lesions, such as whether individuals used high blood pressure medications.

Barriers to Healthy Aging Among Asian American Immigrants

Older Asian American immigrants are healthier and happier if they are socially active, connected to their families and communities, and are able to maintain their cultural values while adapting to Western culture, according to a study in Gerontology and Geriatric Medicine.

Researchers interviewed more than 3,000 Chinese American individuals between ages 60 and 105 over a 2-year period to explore their psychological well-being, involvement in the community, quality of life, and acculturation and use of traditional Chinese medicine.

In a review of 20 studies published by the lead researcher, six articles examined the risk factors and impact of psychological distress among global Chinese populations. Researchers found that although depression and loneliness may negatively impact cognitive function, those effects may be buffered by individual, social, and family resources. The studies show that a well-connected community, active social life, and high acculturation are essential to improving older Chinese adults’ health and lowering depression. In addition, individuals who were employed and those who lived in rural areas reported a higher quality of life than those who did not work or lived in urban settings.

Family relationships and cultural backgrounds also factor into end-of-life care, indicating that care plans should include cultural considerations and traditional family values. Finally, the studies revealed that traditional Chinese medicine is still widely used among Chinese older adults in the United States in conjunction with non-Western and Western forms of health care.


Small Amounts of Sugar May Improve Memory in Older Adults

A small dose of sugar can improve memory in older adults, motivate them to work harder, and put them in a good mood when performing difficult tasks, according to new research by the University of Warwick.

Researchers gave young (ages 18 to 27) and older (ages 65 to 82) adult participants a drink containing a small amount of glucose, and asked them to perform various memory tasks. Other participants were given a placebo containing artificial sweetener.

Researchers measured participants’ levels of engagement with the task, their memory score, mood, and their own perception of effort. They found that increasing energy through a glucose drink can help young and older adults try harder compared to those who had the artificial sweetener. For young adults, though, this is where it ended: glucose did not improve their mood or memory performance.

Older adults who had a glucose drink showed significantly better memory and more positive mood compared to older adults who consumed the artificial sweetener. Although objective measures of task engagement showed that older adults in the glucose group put more effort into the task than those who consumed the artificial sweetener, their own self-reports showed that they did not believe they had tried any harder.


Pregnancy History May Affect Risk of Alzheimer’s Disease

A woman’s history of pregnancy may affect her risk of Alzheimer’s disease (AD) decades later, according to a study published in Neurology®. The study found that women who give birth to five or more children may be more likely to develop AD than women who have fewer births. The study also showed that women who have an incomplete pregnancy, whether through miscarriage or abortion, are less likely to develop AD than women who have never had an incomplete pregnancy.

Researchers combined data from two independent population-based studies from Korea and Greece, with a total of 3,549 women. The women, who were an average age of 71 at the start of the study, provided information on their reproductive history and took tests of their memory and thinking skills. A total of 118 women developed AD and 896 women developed mild cognitive impairment.

Women who had given birth to five or more children were 70% more likely to develop AD. Fifty-nine of 716 women with five or more children developed AD, compared to 53 of 2,751 women with fewer children. In addition, 47 of 2,375 women who had an incomplete pregnancy developed AD, compared to 71 of 1,174 women who never had an incomplete pregnancy.