

5. Identifying and responding to multimorbidity

Best care for older people in hospital

What is it?

Multimorbidity is the presence of multiple diseases and medical conditions – chronic or acute – in the one person.¹ A recognition of multimorbidity requires these multiple diseases and conditions to be treated concurrently without a hierarchical order.²

Aspects of the patient's context – biopsychosocial factors, risk factors, support networks, health care consumption and the patient's coping strategies – may function as modifiers of the effects of multimorbidity.³ Multimorbidity requires a holistic approach which puts the patient, not the disease, at the centre of the plan.⁴

This factsheet will identify strategies you can use in the identification and care of older people with multimorbidity.

Why is it important?

- Multimorbidity is associated with more complex clinical management, poor treatment outcomes, longer hospital stays, increased healthcare costs and increased risk of readmission.
- The prevalence of multimorbidity increases substantially with age.⁵ More than half of older people have three or more chronic diseases.⁴ These may include cancer, diabetes, asthma, arthritis, pain and mental illness.
- Current clinical guidelines have a single disease focus and rarely consider the cumulative impact of multimorbidity. This can lead to inefficient care which is inconvenient and unsatisfactory to both patients and clinicians.^{6,7}
- Older people with multimorbidity are more likely to have a poorer quality of life, experiencing depression, premature mortality and frequent hospital admissions.^{6,8}

- Older people with multimorbidity are often prescribed multiple medications (polypharmacy). Those on five or more medications are three times more likely to be taking inappropriate medications and are at greater risk of an adverse drug reaction or medication errors. Non-adherence to prescribed regimes, and the interaction of drugs and multiple diseases can affect the burden of care.⁶
- Eighty per cent of older people report having poor health literacy that impacts on their ability to understand and use health information.⁹

How can you respond to the needs of older people with multimorbidity?

All hospital staff have a shared role in identifying and responding to multimorbidity in patients.

To provide best care:

- Ensure that the patient's medical history is complete and that medication safety and quality systems are in place to monitor the management of multimorbidity.
- Check that mental health issues such as depression and cognitive issues such as dementia are recognised as multimorbidity.
- Consult with the patient and their family and carers to determine what the patient's primary concerns are.
- Engage an interdisciplinary team to manage the patient's multimorbidity.

Involve patients, their family and carers in the management of multimorbidity

- Find out what is most important to the patient, their family and carers in determining the treatment or care plan.
- Ask the patient about their experience of their multimorbidity, and what they want from their treatment.

- Consider the patient's health literacy level and their understanding of multimorbidity.
- Encourage shared decision-making so the patient and their family or carer are engaged in the management of their conditions.
- Encourage the discussion of advance care planning with the patient and their family or carer.

Assess medication safety in older people with multimorbidity

- Discuss the need for a medication review with the patient, their family or carer, the multidisciplinary team and the patient's GP.
- Check the patient's understanding of their medication needs.
- Minimise the risks to the patient associated with polypharmacy and medication non-adherence.

Ensure continuity of care for patients with multimorbidity

- Engage the patient's other care providers such as pharmacists, specialists, case managers and GPs to provide a coordinated service.
- Make sure the patient and their family or carers are involved in the management of multimorbidity and care plan processes.
- Ensure there are mechanisms in place to monitor older people with multimorbidity and escalate their care when required.
- Review and ongoing appraisal of the revised care plan is required when the patient's circumstances and goals of care change. Ideally this should be coordinated through a single clinician who intimately knows the patient, the issues and the care goals.

Want to know more?

Older people in hospital

www.health.vic.gov.au/older-people-in-hospital

National Safety and Quality Health Service Standards, 2011, Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care. <http://www.safetyandquality.gov.au/our-work/medication-safety/>

Guiding principles for the care of older adults with multimorbidity: An approach for clinicians, 2012, Boyd, C, et al, *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*. http://www.americangeriatrics.org/files/documents/MCC_principles.pdf

Minimizing inappropriate medications in older populations: A 10-step conceptual framework, 2012, Scott, I.A, et al, *The American Journal of Medicine*, 125, 529–537. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0002934311009016>

See Factsheet 11. *References* for references cited in this factsheet.

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Determine if the patient has multimorbidity



assess for the impact of mental health and wellbeing
undertake a comprehensive medical review
consult the interdisciplinary team

Assess the patient's psychosocial situation to understand what factors may impact multimorbidity



consider the effect of the patient's:

- social and support network
- cultural background
- socioeconomic status
- coping strategies
- burden of disease
- level of healthcare consumption

Explore the impact of multimorbidity on the patient



ask the patient what they want from treatment, encouraging discussion of prognosis, life expectancy, functional status and quality of life
consider factors influencing the patient's multimorbidity management:

- level of health literacy
- cultural background

Adjust the treatment plan to account for multimorbidity



consider the cumulative effects of treatments for multiple conditions, and weigh the possible benefits and harm of treatment
communicate with interdisciplinary staff
ask the patient if the treatment plan meets their needs

Conduct a medication review considering the patient's multimorbidity



consider the interaction of multiple medications, and eliminate any unnecessary medications
check the patient's understanding of their medication needs
recommend medication reconciliation

Ensure there are systems in place for ongoing support and monitoring



ensure every patient with multimorbidity has their care coordinated by a designated clinician
focus on providing care that optimises benefits, minimises harm and enhances quality of life
reassess outcomes on a regular basis