



Age-Related and Health Condition Changes in Older Adults (for personal support workers)

Why is knowledge of age-related changes important for your long-term care practice?

The primary population in long-term care (LTC) is older adults who may be living with several complex and/or chronic geriatric conditions. It is important for care providers in LTC to understand common geriatric conditions and age-related changes. This is especially important because personal support workers (PSWs) and other care providers who can recognize and report signs and symptoms of changes in health conditions can prevent acute deterioration (worsening of these conditions) and even death.

Here are some examples of complex and/or chronic health conditions you need to know about to succeed in your LTC practice:

- Dementia, depression and delirium (3Ds)
- Incontinence
- Orthostatic hypotension
- Falls
- Osteoporosis
- Polypharmacy
- Pain
- Failure to thrive
- Frailty
- Abuse

Caring for older adults living with long-term health conditions

For most older adults living in LTC, it is the last place they live, and is where they receive end-of-life care. That is why the goal of LTC must include creating the best life possible for residents. Preceptors can help students focus their learning plan toward a perspective of improving resident quality of life, rather than restoration. An example of this is by finding opportunities to promote dignity, independence, preference and privacy in care interactions (i.e., the DIPPS model used in PSW education in Ontario).

What are age-related changes?

The aging process naturally causes biological changes to the body that are usually unavoidable. These changes are independent of other health conditions an older adult may be living with. Some examples include:

- fewer nerves cells
- reduced feelings of touch, pain and temperature
- poorer short-term memory
- reduced taste and smell
- reduced lung muscle strength and cardiac reserve
- slower recovery of activity
- shortness of breath
- less flexible joints and tendons
- weaker swallowing muscles
- reduced kidney function in regulating water and salt
- reduced immunity

How you can apply knowledge of age-related and health condition changes in your LTC practice

You have a key role to play in helping care team members meet resident needs. You can use your knowledge of age-related changes and health conditions to provide safe and appropriate personal care. For PSWs, this includes several important steps in providing care:

- Observing
- Reporting
- Recording

You can also use your knowledge of the resident's baseline to identify signs of acute deterioration. Examples of changes in condition you need to be able to recognize include:

- confusion
- change in responsive behaviours
- falls
- change in level of consciousness
- change in function (e.g., too tired to help dress themselves)
- new pain
- change in urine output
- change in weight

Once you observe any of these signs and symptoms, you must report that change. If those changes are known to you to be related to a health condition, you must report them as soon as possible. There are Ontario Centres for Learning, Research and Innovation in Long-Term Care's practice tools available to help you succeed in your role working with age-related and health condition changes as a PSW. These include: [Age-Related Changes and Care Implications](#) and [Know Your Resident's Baseline](#).

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