

What is Geriatrics?

An Overview of Health Care for Older Adults



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The Need for Geriatric Specialists

According to the American Geriatrics Society, the number of people 65 and older is larger than ever before, and those 85 and older constitute the fastest growing segment of the population.

With this "graying of America" comes the demand for physicians and other health care professionals with expertise in geriatrics and a need in the number of caregivers who can help older loved ones live longer and healthier lives.

But what is geriatrics? And what can caregivers do to help?

For more information and tips on healthy aging, visit the following Web sites:

www.Healthinaging.org

<http://medschool.slu.edu/agingsuccessfully/>

www.healthandage.com

For a referral to a geriatrician call 1-888-457-5203.



A Holistic Approach to Care

What is Geriatrics?

Older persons may react to illness and disease differently than younger adults.

Geriatrics is the branch of medicine that focuses on health promotion and disease prevention in later life.



Generally, geriatricians are primary care physicians who are board-certified in either Family Practice or Internal Medicine and have also acquired the additional training necessary to obtain the Certificate of Qualifications in Geriatric Medicine. Geriatricians are able to treat older patients, manage multiple disease symptoms, and develop care plans that address the special health care needs of older adults.

There are about 9,000 geriatricians in the U.S. There are also several hundred

Osteopathic physicians (DO) certified in geriatrics, as well as some 2,400 board-certified geropsychiatrists (a psychiatrist trained to deal with the mental health needs and specific syndromes faced by older adults).

A Team Approach

There are other trained health professionals who specialize in caring for older adults. In some situations, a team of health care professionals will work together in the medical evaluation of an older patient. The geriatrics team may include, in addition to the geriatrician, any or all of the following professionals:

- Nurse
- Social worker
- Nutritionist
- Physical therapist
- Occupational therapist
- Consultant pharmacist
- Geropsychiatrist

The team looks at the person's physical, mental and social conditions in addition to the person's medical history

and present health condition. The team also looks for the effects of past illnesses, as well as "geriatric syndromes" - common health concerns found in the frail elderly such as incontinence, frequent falls, memory problems, and the side effects caused by multiple medications. Members of the geriatrics team also evaluate the social support available to a patient, usually a spouse, children or friends, and his or her living and community conditions. The team also considers the patient's ability to perform activities of daily living (ADLs), such as bathing, dressing and eating.

While the geriatrician often serves as the "point person," each member of the geriatrics team is a skilled health professional. All play an important role in the proper assessment and care of an older patient.



Who Needs a Geriatrician?

While primary care physicians care for most older persons, geriatricians are often sought to provide consultations for the frailest of older persons because of their unique qualifications and training. Geriatricians frequently provide the primary care for older adults who have complicated medical and social problems.

Regardless of an older person's age, a geriatrician should be consulted when:

- The person's condition causes considerable impairment and frailty. These patients tend to be over the age of 75 and coping with a number of diseases and disabilities, including cognitive (mental) problems; or
- Family members and friends are feeling considerable stress and strain as caregivers.