

ASSESSMENT OF OLDER PEOPLE WITH PRE-EXISTING DISABILITIES

The New Zealand Guidelines Group has developed a best practice, evidence-based guideline providing recommendations for appropriate and effective processes for assessment of personal, social, functional and clinical needs in older people. This summary covers important issues for assessment of older people with pre-existing disabilities.

The majority of older people with a disability live within the community and have their health needs met through the primary health care system. People with pre-existing disabilities are a very heterogeneous group. Some needs of this group are currently not met adequately due to the lack of integration of supporting services.

'Diagnostic overshadowing' can be a barrier to effective assessment and care; that is, the assumption in an aged care setting that problems are caused by a person's disability, or in a disability service setting that they are part of ageing.

Older people with a disability will usually be able to give informed consent to an assessment process. It is essential that an assessor have expertise and training in both the type of disability and in issues for older people, and that the issue of consent is handled appropriately.

People with pre-existing disabilities have a high rate of co-morbid medical conditions, and polypharmacy, particularly the inappropriate use of psychotropic medication, is a significant issue.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Older people with pre-existing disabilities should be eligible for any screening or assessment programme at 55 years.
- Assessors of people with intellectual or other disabilities must have specialist training in the area, in addition to specialist training in the assessment process and consent issues.
- The multidisciplinary team supporting the assessment of people with pre-existing disabilities should include specialists with expertise in the disability.
- Any assessment process for people with disabilities should be designed to ensure that the older person with disability is involved in the assessment process.

The Assessment Processes For Older People Guideline and summaries have been endorsed by:



The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists - New Zealand Branch



Complete endorsement list available in full guideline.



DOMAINS OF ASSESSMENT

Areas of need of most importance to older people

- personal care
- social participation
- control over daily life
- food
- safety

Domains and dimensions

These are areas in which impairment can be detected at an early stage.

Physical health and functioning

key dimensions: chronic illness, continence, nutrition*, gait, mobility*, cardiac conditions, gastrointestinal conditions, pulmonary conditions, cerebrovascular conditions, co-morbidities*, ADLs and IADLs (including self-care and domestic abilities)*, iatrogenic disease (specifically due to polypharmacy)*, sexual functioning, speech and language impairment*, dental/oral health*, vision* and hearing*

Mental health and functioning

key dimensions: anxiety*, depression*, other mental illness*, cognitive functioning, dementia, substance abuse, iatrogenic disease due to polypharmacy*, emotional well-being

Social functioning

key dimensions: financial status and management*, housing, family/whānau support/contact*, social networks*, social activities and support

Presence and roles of carers, especially informal carers

Risk factors

- aged 75 years or older
- socially isolated and/or living alone
- divorced/separated, never married, single or widowed
- recently bereaved
- has no children
- has poor or limited economic resources
- recently discharged from hospital
- presenting at an emergency department
- recent change in health status with an impact on capacity for independent living
- has multiple disorders or illness
- cognitively impaired
- depressed
- poor self-perceived health
- high or low body mass index
- at the lower extreme of functional impairment
- low physical activity
- taking 3 or more prescription/non-prescription medications
- impairment in sight or hearing
- carer showing signs of stress/change of carer
- carer requests an assessment for the older person

Also consider:

- alcohol, tobacco and/or substance use
- abuse of the person by another*

*These are areas of particular risk of impairment for people with pre-existing disabilities.