Should Seniors Be Screened Annually for Memory Problems?

Frequent assessments of folks 65 and older may help doctors better identify mild cognitive issues and enable earlier treatment.

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Mild cognitive impairment can be a symptom of sleep problems, medical illness or depression or sometimes even a side effect of medications. Difficulty thinking and remembering are also early signs of Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia, which are more likely to affect seniors. This is why experts suggest physicians start conducting annual cognitive screenings for individuals beginning at age 65, according to recommendations from the American Academy of Neurology (AAN) published in the medical journal Neurology.

AAN urged doctors to track how often they evaluated older people for thinking and memory problems each year. The organization believes that noting such information in a person's medical record can help other doctors and medical staff recognize mild cognitive impairment in individuals. Additionally, it might enable earlier intervention and help ensure that patients receive the best care possible.

"We cannot expect people to report their own memory and thinking problems because they may not recognize that they are having problems or they may not share them with their doctors," said AAN fellow Norman L. Foster, MD, of the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. "Annual assessments will not only help identify mild cognitive impairment early, [they] will also help physicians more closely monitor possible worsening of the condition."

Early diagnosis can pinpoint temporary health troubles caused by sleep issues, depression and medications. But for those that are permanent, such as Alzheimer's, AAN recommends checking how frequently people receive information about their condition as early as possible to help them avoid exploitation, plan for their care and monitor their condition.

In addition, AAN proposes that doctors describe symptoms to identified family and caregivers as well as provide them with the necessary support and access to services to help them cope while dealing with their loved one's condition.

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