Age Specific Patient Care Concerns

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Age Specific: Patient Care Concerns

Every patient is different. This can be said of their age group, too, because with each comes different medical needs. While any patient can experience general ailments, such as a broken arm or nervous stomach, each age group brings its own specific conditions that you as the caregiver MUST be aware of. Further, in order to accurately and thoroughly assess patients across all age groups, you must find a way to effectively communicate with them. You must understand their needs and what they might be facing at their time of life.

In assessing and assisting all patients, you must be mindful of their primary language, whether they have speech or hearing impairments or if they are confused, depressed or present with signs of illness or stress. You must ascertain whether they may have learning disabilities, cultural differences that may preclude fair medical treatment, and you must understand their family structure.

However, in assessing and assisting very young patients, you must also be mindful of an additional set of factors. For example, in neonates and infants, their vital signs must be checked carefully, and you should address their growth and development, their feeding habits, and their bond with parental figures.

With older children, there is yet another set of factors to consider, such as peer pressure and how it may play into the condition with which they present. In adolescent patients, you must be very aware of their privacy. They are growing toward becoming sexual beings and are usually starting puberty by this age. They are extremely aware of their bodies and easily embarrassed. Their feelings must be considered with great care.

In assessing and assisting adult patients, there are other factors to consider. And each age group has its own set. As a caregiver, it is critical that you educate yourself about these factors so that you can do your job effectively. In order to do so, you must become an effective communicator.

Communication Across The Ages

Clear communication with the patient can be the key to providing age-specific care. At just about any age there may be barriers to communication that you should look for. Give the person your full attention and observe closely. You may not be able to eliminate barriers, but you can minimize them by increasing your awareness.

From Birth to Old Age

From birth to old age, there are certain qualities and needs that most people share with others their age as they progress together through each stage of life. As a healthcare worker, you provide care to people of all ages. By understanding the age-specific needs usually associated with each stage of life, you can provide better, more appropriate care, tailored to the needs of each individual. For every patient across all age groups you should:

- assess primary language
- check for speech or hearing impairments
• check for confusion / depression / signs of illness or stress
• be aware of possible learning disabilities
• be mindful of cultural differences
• understand family structure

Assess Primary Language and Check for Impairments

You should assess the patient’s primary language and whether communication might be clearer with the help of a translator. Determine if confusion or depression might be a sign of physical or mental illness.

Confusion / Depression / Signs of Illness or Stress

Find out if the patient is under stress, or worried about healthcare decisions that might affect their schooling, job or family.

Learning Disabilities and Other

Check for any apparent learning disabilities, and make an effort to understand the patient’s family structure and support system.

Neonates: Birth - 28 Days

Age-specific care begins with neonates. The first 28 days of life are a time when neonates are in a state of total dependency, and their basic body functions are being established. The following is a checklist of body functions to test:

• reflexes
• good APGAR scores
• vital signs
• weight gain
• blood glucose levels

The presence of normal reflexes, such as grasping, gagging and startling, are key for the neonate. Other important concerns are for good APGAR scores, age-appropriate vital signs - temperature, pulse and respiration - steady weight gain and blood glucose levels when appropriate.

Always handle the neonate in a gentle, comforting manner to avoid over-stimulation. Teach parents proper childcare skills for feeding, diapering, cord care and bathing. Be sure that parents understand the importance of keeping the infant warm.

New parents also need to be taught to look for jaundice, fever, and to avoid certain sleeping positions associated with Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). Make sure parents understand the importance of safety devices such as car seats.
Infants and Toddlers: 0 - 3 Years

Infants and toddlers are in a period of rapid growth and learning. They explore the world through direct sensory contact. Though they are dependent, they are beginning to develop a separate self. Key care issues at this age are to foster good child-parent bonds, keep immunizations and checkups on schedule, and provide a safe living environment.

During checkups, ask parents of toddlers about the child’s feeding habits, motor skills, and if any vision or hearing problems have been noticed. Remind parents that children develop at different speeds, and that colds or flu are common among young children in daycare. Hand washing should be emphasized as a way to prevent disease transmission.

Check the toddler’s teeth and review the essentials of tooth care with the parents. Encourage parents to communicate with the child, and to touch and cuddle. All of these nurturing techniques help to promote healthy bonds and good parenting. With infants, limit the number of staff workers assigned to each one to avoid “stranger anxiety,” and always speak to an infant before a touch to avoid startling her.

Young Children: 4 - 6 Years

When a child reaches the age of 4 to 6 years, they begin to need rules and boundaries, praise and feedback. It is important for the parents to keep immunizations and checkups on schedule and learn healthy habits for nutrition and grooming. In addition, parents may need to learn about safety equipment, such as bicycle helmets, and elbow and kneepads for skateboarding, and safety issues regarding fire and the pool.

Reduce Fear and Anxiety

When providing care, explain any procedures to both the parents and the child to help avoid fearful fantasies in the child. Never lie to the child about whether something will hurt; reassure them that it won’t hurt for long. Explain grooming and hygiene as an infection control technique. Encourage the child to make reasonable choices.

Older Children: 7 - 12 Years

Use toys and games to help teach the child and reduce fear of health issues. Use talking, singing and distraction like colorful stickers to divert attention from procedures that may be frightening. Always encourage the child to ask questions and talk about feelings to encourage the development of independence and social skills.

From ages 7 to 12, growth continues slowly until there is a spurt at puberty. Children in this age group are becoming mentally active and developing a greater sense of self. They have a great need to fit in with peers, and social activities take on increased importance. Key emotional health and safety issues at this age are to learn to feel competent and useful, to continue immunizations and checkups, and to
begin to obtain honest information about alcohol, drugs and sexuality. It is also time to begin learning playground safety habits and how to resolve conflicts peacefully.

At this age, vital signs approach the norms of the adult patient. Questions may arise about the development of secondary sexual characteristics and should be dealt with honestly. Privacy is a key issue.

Do your best to guide the child toward a healthy lifestyle and safety choices, including exercise and nutrition. Help parents talk to the child about peer pressure regarding smoking, substance abuse, and sexuality. Often, an outside authority, such as a healthcare worker, can be a big help.

Adolescents: 13 - 20 Years

Between ages 13 and 20, an adolescent’s body transforms into an adult, sexually mature body, and complex thinking develops. Adolescents need help to balance identity development with the need for close relationships. Peer groups can come into conflict with family demands, and it can become a time when they challenge authority.

During this time in a child’s life, the following issues should be considered:

- privacy and respect
- checkups
- sexual responsibility and substance abuse
- risk taking and handling violence

Key emotional, health and safety issues during adolescence include privacy and respect and finding ways to foster teamwork. Checkups should continue, and adolescents must learn about sexual responsibility, and ways to resist the increased temptations toward substance abuse. Risk taking, particularly in driving and risky sports, needs to be addressed. Adolescents should also learn ways to peacefully handle potentially violent situations.

Begin looking for signs of common adolescent health problems, such as the nutritional disorders obesity, anorexia, and bulimia. Watch for acne and sexually related health problems like STDs and pregnancy. Reassure adolescents that stress and their individual body changes are normal.

Adolescent patients should be treated as adults to foster an atmosphere of trust and respect. Speak to them directly instead of talking through their parents. Explain procedures, and encourage questions. Be considerate of sensitive issues, such as appearance and relationships. Adolescents with a family history of genetically related diseases should learn about their family history and be screened appropriately. Adolescent girls should be taught breast self-examination; boys should be taught testicular self-examination.
Young Adults: 21 - 39 Years

Young adults 21 to 39 years of age have reached physical and sexual maturity and are acquiring new skills and seeking partnership. Key concerns are support, honesty and respect for their personal values. They need to have regular health checkups and updated immunizations. They should be encouraged to pursue exercise, good nutrition, and weight control, and to be aware of long-term health risks, such as heart disease and cancer. They should also give attention to safety hazards at home and work.

Young adults need to be monitored for STDs, and be taught testicular and breast self-examination. Discuss issues related to stress, as this stage in life usually includes major changes, such as marriage, having children, and career adjustments. Since young adults may feel invulnerable to disease and ignore early warning signs, encourage monitoring for any signs of chronic conditions. Explain the specifics of a healthy physical workout, including warm-up and stretching, and emphasize the importance of proper nutrition and diet.

Middle Adults: 40 - 64 Years

Middle adults, ages 40 to 64, continue to learn and be creative. Many may re-evaluate priorities and start to plan for retirement. Middle adults should be screened for chronic conditions that often develop at this age, such as diabetes, prostate disorders and breast cancer. Women should have counseling on menopause, taking estrogen, and measures to prevent osteoporosis.

The healthcare worker should encourage middle adults to express freely any worries about the future and encourage them to plan for a healthy and active retirement. The stress of mid-life crisis may require specific psychiatric interventions for some patients, so be alert for signs of depression or other mental illness. Also, be alert for patient stress resulting from being in the “sandwich generation,” or the generation responsible for caring for their parents as well as their children. Remind middle adult patients to make this a positive stage of life.

Older Adults: 65 - 79 Years

Older adults continue to learn and think, but some decline in physical abilities and sensory perception. New roles may require adjustment, such as being a grandparent, or returning to single life after the death of a spouse. Aspects of aging need to be accepted with extra effort made to remain active.

Stay alert to signs and complaints of the more common chronic conditions at this age, such as arthritis, hypertension, hearing impairment, and heart disease. Also watch for digestive and esophageal problems such as reflux, and bladder and bowel problems. The healthcare worker should encourage older adult patients to express feelings about their life accomplishments, as well as feelings of loss and grief. Use of medications can grow to include multiple medications and become complex. It is important to help older adult patients work out a manageable medication schedule.
Explain any procedure using appropriate terms. Provide warmth if necessary because of the possibility of decreased heat regulation. Be alert to the development of any impairment that may inhibit mobility or daily activities. Suggest practical ways of dealing with any impairment, but don’t assume impairments exist.

Advice on home safety may be important. Offer contacts for support services. Encourage social activities or volunteer work to keep older adult patients engaged. The sense of giving back and staying active can make all the difference in a person’s emotional outlook at this age.

**Adults 80 and Older**

There is no reason to assume mental decline has occurred in patients 80 and older. There may be signs of confusion, but those may just signal a treatable illness or depression. Encourage expression of feelings and thought, encourage humor, and remind them to stay positive to help prevent depression. Health should be monitored closely, and proper nutrition, exercise and rest should be encouraged.

**Chronic Illnesses and Health Problems**

Be on the alert for chronic illnesses and major health problems in patients 80 and over. Medications can become even more complicated and may require you to work out very detailed plans, possibly with color coding and reminder timers to help the patient follow a schedule. Update immunizations, particularly against influenza, which can be life threatening for older adults. The patient’s living environment should be monitored to prevent falls. Safety grips, ramps and similar aides may be crucial.

Encourage healthy eating and adequate fluid intake. Monitor changes in digestive functions, such as taste, chewing, and bowel functions, which might compromise proper nutrition. However, avoid treating an older adult like a child, as patients will likely sense and resent being patronized.

**Conclusion**

With every patient there are different needs and a different set of age-related medical and psychological factors that may affect their health. An efficient caretaker knows the differences between each age group and knows how to communicate with patients effectively in order to provide the most accurate assessments and the highest level of care. In this way, caretakers also go far in protecting themselves and their institutions from potential lawsuits that can result from perceived inadequate care and lack of understanding.