

Medical Challenges associated with aging in Autism

Margaret L. Bauman, MD
Boston University School of Medicine
January 11, 2022

Diagnostic Challenges

- **Medical conditions may present differently in adults with ASD.**
 - Symptoms may not be easily recognized by the average physician such as posturing and GI distress
- **Atypical or disruptive behavior may be signs of pain and discomfort**
 - Sleep problems
 - Excessive tantruming, self-injury, aggression,

Diagnostic Challenges

- We need valid and reliable diagnostic tools for ASD adults and seniors
- Many are non-verbal and cannot indicate their symptoms
 - Many cannot accurately point to the areas of discomfort. Poor sensory awareness
- Many have self-restricted diets (picky eaters)
 - high carbohydrates diet

Medical Conditions

- Cancer
- Seizures
- Metabolic disorders
- Cardiovascular disorders
- Diabetes
- Arthritis
- Hypertension
- Gastrointestinal disorders
- Obesity
- Tardive dyskinesia

Medically Related Conditions

- **Chronic pain**
- **Dental issues**
- **Sleep disorders**
- **Balance and motor challenges**
- **Sensory processing issues**
 - Vision
 - Hearing
 - Vestibular
 - Tactile, taste, smell

Mental Health Conditions

- **Frequent mental distress**
- **Anxiety**
- **Depression**
- **Post-traumatic stress**
- **Alzheimer's Disease**
- **Psychosis**

Preventative Screening

- **Adults with DDs and diabetes: screened less frequently than task force guidelines recommend**
(Shireman et al, 2010)
- **Women: low rates breast and cervical cancer screening, esp. in those living at home**
(Parish et al, 2012)
- **Women: most common c/o with menses was PMS and mood, but in ASD women *behaviors* accompanied menses**
- **Dysmenorrhea common, treatments underutilized**
(Hamilton et al, 2011)

Provider Limitations

- **PCP shortage**
 - Not familiar with autism, not part of medical education
- **Limited amount of time to assess these individuals**
 - Stressed: time constraints, productivity
 - Paperwork
- **Low Medicaid/Medicare reimbursement**



What Are some of the Medical Problems for Aging Autistic Adults?

- Finding a PCP
- The Emergency Room and the Hospital
- Insurance
- Medical concerns for adults
 - Medications
 - Obesity
 - GI
 - Seizures
 - Sleep
 - Vision
 - Dental care
 - Preventative care

Parting Words – or What Needs to Be Done

- Many medical problems in childhood continue throughout the lifespan
 - Communication deficits and sensory differences create challenges in medical care
- Much work to do to assure quality medical care for aging adults with autism
 - Physician exposure and training

Parting Words

- **Family and professional advocacy for policy change is sorely needed!**
- **Greater awareness of the needs of aged adults on the autism spectrum.**