

Temporary memory loss strikes hospitalized seniors

April 14 2011

Battling an illness, lack of sleep and strange surroundings can make any hospital patient feel out of sorts.

For seniors, hospitalizations actually may cause temporary [memory loss](#) and difficulty in understanding discharge instructions, according to a new Northwestern Medicine study.

The seniors go back to normal one month after the [hospital](#) stay, the study found. But immediately following a hospitalization is a critical time in which seniors may need extra support from healthcare professionals and family, according to Lee Lindquist, the lead author of the study, published online in the [Journal of General Internal Medicine](#), March 2011.

Lindquist, M.D., is an assistant professor of geriatrics at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and a physician at Northwestern Memorial Hospital.

"A helper on the day of discharge could make sure a senior understands discharge instructions and help her get home and follow instructions safely," Lindquist said. "If a patient is by herself the day of a hospital discharge, it's possible that she won't comprehend complicated medical instructions, increasing medication errors and chances of re-hospitalization."

More than 200 seniors, age 70 and older, who lived on their own in the

Chicago area and were not diagnosed with dementia or other [cognitive problems](#), took part in the study.

At the time of discharge, cognition tests were administered to examine mental status. Almost one-third had low cognition that was previously unrecognized. One month later, 58 percent of those patients no longer had low cognition. They had significant improvement in areas of orientation, registration, repetition, comprehension, naming, reading, writing and calculation.

Healthcare professionals need to be more aware of seniors' thought processes on the day they are released from the hospital, Lindquist said. Screening all [seniors](#) for low cognition before they leave any hospital could help doctors and nurses flag patients in need of specialized transitional care with more frequent follow-ups in the days after hospitalization.

"When the senior is no longer sick enough to be in the hospital, it doesn't mean they're 100 percent ready to be on their own," Lindquist said. "It's a critical time and they need extra support and understanding from healthcare professionals and family."

More information: The title of the study is "Improvements in Cognition Following Hospital Discharge of Community Dwelling Seniors." www.springerlink.com/content/g063117k57247078/

Provided by Northwestern University

Citation: Temporary memory loss strikes hospitalized seniors (2011, April 14) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-04-temporary-memory-loss-hospitalized-seniors.html>

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