

Learning about the impact of multiple symptoms in older adults

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"Symptoms" is the medical term for any sign of a health problem, even if that sign doesn't help your healthcare provider diagnose a specific illness. Symptoms, such as feeling tired or rundown (also called fatigue), are among the leading causes of disability for older adults.

Sometimes symptoms are directly caused by illness—for example, an aching chest can be a symptom associated with a heart attack. But often, symptoms have multiple causes. For example, fatigue can be a common symptom when you have conditions such as knee osteoarthritis, depression, and heart failure.

What's more, [older adults](#) often experience more than one symptom at a time, which can make each symptom feel worse.

Up until now, we haven't had much information about how symptoms that occur at the same time affect an older adult's ability to function. To learn more, a team of researchers recently examined information from a large study of older [adults](#), the National Health and Aging Trends Study (NHATS), which included more than 7,500 participants aged 65 and older. The study was published in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*.

The researchers focused on answers given to several questions in the NHATS that showed whether a participant had symptoms such as:

- Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing

- Trouble falling or staying asleep at night
- Depression or anxiety

The researchers also recorded measurements of the participants' grip strength, whether they walked slowly, their balance, and their ability to rise from a chair. They were also asked whether they had fallen one or more times in the last year.

The researchers also measured whether participants had any [chronic diseases](#), whether they had an overnight hospital stay during the last year, and whether they had trouble performing their daily activities (such as getting in or out of bed, eating, toileting, bathing, and getting dressed).

The researchers learned that 75 percent of older adults had at least one [symptom](#) and nearly half had two or more symptoms. They noted that nearly 14 percent—almost 5 million older adults in the U.S.—had four or more symptoms.

The researchers learned that:

- Symptoms increased with [older age](#).
- Women were more likely to have more symptoms than men.
- Compared to white individuals, black and Hispanic participants had more symptoms. Older adults with lower levels of education had a higher number of symptoms than those with higher education levels.
- Current smoking, obesity, and an inactive lifestyle were also associated with a higher number of symptoms.
- Participants who had a chronic medical condition, or multiple chronic conditions, also experienced more symptoms.

Importantly, older adults who reported more symptoms had weaker grip strength and walked more slowly. Over time, older adults with more

symptoms had an increased risk of falls, hospitalizations, disability, and mortality.

The researchers believe that as we age and experience more multiple chronic conditions, the number of us living with multiple symptoms as older adults is likely to grow. While healthcare providers understand that treating symptoms is important to improving quality of life at the end-of-life ([palliative care](#)), there is less understanding about the best way to treat multiple symptoms that older adults experience.

The researchers said that their findings highlight the need for more research on symptoms in older adults to develop effective management strategies.

More information: Kushang V. Patel et al, Symptom Burden Among Community-Dwelling Older Adults in the United States, *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/jgs.15673](https://doi.org/10.1111/jgs.15673)

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