

Managing multiple health conditions



If you are an older adult living with multiple health conditions, you aren't alone. In fact, according to the National Institute on Aging, approximately 65% of all adults age 65 and older have at least two chronic health problems.¹

Challenges of managing several conditions at once

Managing several health conditions at once may be very challenging. It may mean taking different medications (with different side effects) and seeing lots of different doctors. Plus, each of the conditions may have different diet and exercise regimens, which may be confusing and difficult to adhere to.^{2,3}

All of this may leave people feeling overwhelmed, discouraged, fearful or depressed.^{2,3}

While there is no way to make managing multiple conditions easy, there are ways to be an active part of your healthcare team. There may also be resources to help you stay organized and on top of your treatment plan and medication routine.

Why do chronic conditions accumulate?

Many different factors play a role in the development of health problems, so it's impossible to pinpoint one cause for why conditions tend to build up. In most cases, diseases involve a combination of genetics and lifestyle factors. In other words, being born with certain genes can make you more susceptible for certain diseases and an unhealthy lifestyle can further escalate the risk.⁴

Some genes—and some lifestyle factors—increase the risk for several different diseases. Plus, having one disease can increase your risk of having another.⁴

Additionally, having multiple chronic diseases is common because people are living longer, and the older a person becomes, the more likely they are to accumulate more chronic conditions.⁴

Strategies for managing multiple chronic conditions

If you're struggling to manage more than one health condition, read below for some tips and tricks that may help.



Learn about your conditions

Get educated about each of your health conditions and find out what you can do—like eating healthy or being active—to help take control of them. This will likely mean working with your healthcare team to find out what you need to know, as well as what you can and can't do.

Look for additional sources of education, too, such as books and nonprofit organizations.

Consider taking classes or participating in support groups about your conditions. Visit HumanaNeighborhoodCenter.com to learn more. You can also check with your local hospitals and healthcare systems to see if they offer any classes or support groups.

Communicate with your healthcare team

When you are managing multiple chronic conditions, good communications between you and your healthcare team is essential. Sometimes, this is easier said than done! Especially when you have a lot to discuss in a short amount of time.

However, there are a few things you can do that can help—before, during and after your appointment.

Before your appointment

- Make a list. Write down your goals for the visit and the things you want to talk about with your doctor, in order of priority.
- Bring your medications, vitamins and supplements. Put any and all prescription drugs, over-the-counter medications, herbs, vitamins and other supplements in a bag, and bring them to your visit.
- Bring a notebook. Use this to write down what your doctor tells you.
- Consider bringing a close friend or family member. This person may be able to help you provide information to your doctor and help you remember the doctor's instructions.

During your appointment

- Be open about your priorities for care. Let your doctor know what's most important to you. Ask your doctor how different treatment options will affect the parts of your life that are most important to you.
- Answer questions honestly. Even if your doctor asks you questions about things that make you uncomfortable, it's important to answer them openly and honestly. This may include topics like mental health problems, drinking alcohol or other lifestyle habits.
- Repeat your doctor's instructions back and/or ask for written instructions. Make sure you understand what your provider is telling you, including recommended treatments and the risks associated with those treatments.
- Speak up if your treatment plan is too complicated to manage. The more complicated treatment instructions are, the more likely patients are to stop following them.³
- Find out symptoms to track and when to seek care. Learn which symptoms and changes you should be regularly monitoring and tracking—such as your weight, shortness of breath, or level of pain. Make sure you understand when to call your doctor about these symptoms.

After your appointment

There are a few instances that necessitate a call to your doctor. Call your doctor right away if:

- You have questions or don't understand the instructions you were given.
- Your treatment doesn't seem to be working or is causing problems.
- You are experiencing symptoms or changes that need care.
- You seem to be having a bad reaction to a new medication.

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Managing your medications

Managing multiple medications may be a big challenge. If it is for you, you're not alone. Read below for some helpful tips for managing multiple medications.

- Keep a list of your medications. Keeping an updated list of all the medicines you take can help you stay organized and help your healthcare providers deliver better care.^{8,9}
- Ask for a medication review. A medication review, sometimes called a “brown bag checkup,” is an opportunity for you and your healthcare provider and/or pharmacist to discuss all of the medications you're taking. It may also help prevent dangerous drug interactions.^{8,9}
- Manage your refills. These days, you can get your medications refilled in person at the pharmacy, by telephone, online or by mail. Always try to use the same pharmacy for all of your medicines and set up automatic refills if you can.^{8,9}
- Get help paying for your medicines. Talk to your doctor about generic options, when available. You can also bring your formulary from your insurance company to your doctor's appointments. You can also ask your doctor or pharmacist about special discount programs.^{8,9}
- Manage side effects. You can find out the potential side effects for your medication by reading the label or the insert that comes in the medicine's package. Your doctor or pharmacist can also help you identify potential side effects and understand your risk. Always talk to your doctor before making any changes to your medication regimen.^{8,9}
- Remember to take your medicines. If you often have trouble remembering to take your medicines, talk to your doctor. If your current medicine regimen is too overwhelming, you should ask your healthcare team if it can be simplified. Make taking medications part of your routine and keep them in a safe, but an easy-to-see, spot. You can also use a reminder system, such as pillboxes or smartphone apps.¹⁰

Help prevent falls

Some health conditions may increase your risk of falls. Plus, taking certain medications may make you feel dizzy, sleepy or confused, making falls more likely.¹¹

If you feel dizziness, joint pain, shortness of breath, or numbness in your feet and legs, tell your doctor. Also, be sure to share your fall history with your provider, including any falls that you've experienced since your last checkup, no matter how minor.^{11,12}

In some cases, your provider may refer you to a physical therapist. Some types of physical therapists—called vestibular physical therapists—are specially trained in issues regarding balance and the inner ear.¹¹

Coping with depression

It's not uncommon for people managing multiple health conditions to also experience depression—and people who have depression and another health condition tend to have more severe symptoms of both.¹³

Effective treatment for depression is available, and it can help you even if you have other health conditions. In fact, it may even help improve the physical symptoms of your other health conditions or reduce your risk of future problems.¹³

If you think you have depression, it's important to tell your doctor so that you can learn about treatment options that may be available to you. Often times, depression is treated with medication, talk therapy or a combination of both. It may take some trial and error to find the treatment that works best for you.¹³

Working with your support system

Your friends and family can make the daily slog of healthy lifestyle changes, demanding medication regimens, and challenging symptoms more bearable and cheer you up when you're feeling down.

Make sure you discuss your priorities for care and your wishes with your loved ones.

You may need to do some advance care planning—this is a way to help you think about, talk about, and share your thoughts and wishes, including your healthcare decisions.

Advance care planning

Each state varies in their documentation but generally, there are two pieces to an advance care plan: the advance directive (or living will) and the healthcare agent (or healthcare power of attorney).

An advance directive is a newer term for a living will and has to do with your medical care, not your property. According to the National Institute on Aging, it's a written document that goes into effect if you are dying or permanently unconscious and cannot make treatment decisions. It tells doctors how you want to be treated; you can say which of the medical treatments we talked about earlier you'd want, which ones you'd not want, and under which conditions each choice applies.

The second piece is the durable power of attorney for healthcare, or DPA. This is a legal document naming the person we just discussed—your healthcare agent, surrogate or proxy.

Each state has its own version of the two documents so make sure you read them carefully and understand them completely. Some states will allow you to specify on your advance directives who your healthcare agent is and some states will have a separate document. A licensed attorney in your state can help you with any questions and completing the documents.¹⁴

Caring for someone with multiple health conditions

Caring for someone with multiple health conditions can also be challenging.

It's important for you to learn about your loved one's conditions and the available treatments, communicate well with their healthcare team, help manage their medications and watch for signs of depression. Be sure to reflect on conversations you've had with your loved one about their wishes and priorities, and consider all of the potential benefits and challenges of the treatments presented to you.

It's also important to take care of yourself. Don't neglect your own health. Try to exercise, eat a healthy diet, and connect with friends and family for support.

If you need help from others, ask for it and be clear about what you need. For example, you can ask for help with meals or companionship.²

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