



People from different cultures and ethnic backgrounds can have different health risks. It is important for you to know what health risks are most common for your culture, and how to talk to healthcare providers about them.

Chinese American Older Adults: A Guide to Managing Your Health



Special Healthcare Concerns of Older Chinese Americans

Liver infection from Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is a common disease seen in Asia, especially China. It is caused by a virus that affects your liver. Chinese Americans born in China are more at risk for Hepatitis B disease than other Americans. Your healthcare provider can treat Hepatitis B and give you simple diet tips to help you feel better.

Cancer

Cancers, such as breast, colon, and prostate cancer, have started to increase in Chinese American immigrants and their families. Liver cancer, and head and neck cancer, are more common in Chinese Americans. One possible reason for this is that many Chinese Americans, who come to the US, start to adopt an unhealthy diet high in fat and sugar. A low salt, low fat, healthy diet and exercise help decrease the risk of having cancer. Smoking and other tobacco products increase the risk of getting many cancers. Chewing tobacco increases your risk of getting mouth cancer. If you smoke or chew tobacco, your healthcare provider can help you quit.

Depression

Chinese American women over age 65 who were born in China are at greater risk of having depression compared to those born in the US and to Caucasian women. Tell someone immediately—a family member, a friend, or a healthcare worker—if you are depressed or have thoughts of hurting yourself. There are many good treatments for depression.

Lung infection from Tuberculosis (TB)

Chinese Americans born in China are ten times more likely to have or to develop TB compared to other Americans. If you have TB, your family members may get the infection from you. TB causes symptoms like cough, blood in your phlegm (mucus), weight loss and tiredness. Ask for help if you have any of these symptoms. TB is a disease that should be treated immediately for your own health, and to protect your family and friends.

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Cardiovascular Disease

Many Chinese Americans who are 65 years or older have high blood pressure (hypertension). They may also have heart problems and blood vessel problems (cardiovascular disease). Having cardiovascular disease can increase your chances of having a stroke or developing vascular dementia.

a. Stroke

Stroke is a common cause of death in China. Stroke is caused by a blockage in a blood vessel of the brain. Blood vessel problems (sometimes called “hardening of the arteries”) increase the risk for strokes.

b. Vascular dementia

Dementia is an illness of the brain which causes problems with memory and the ability to do everyday activities. Vascular dementia is caused by small breaks in blood vessels in the brain. In older Chinese Americans, vascular dementia can lead to loss of mental functions that may seem like Alzheimer’s disease, another type of dementia. Having high blood pressure makes it much more likely that a person will develop vascular dementia.

A low salt, low fat, healthy diet and regular exercise help decrease risk of stroke and vascular dementia.

Diabetes Mellitus

Some people can develop diabetes, a disease which causes high blood sugar. Chinese Americans who eat foods high in fat and sugar, have a greater chance of becoming overweight or obese, and developing diabetes. Diabetes is a disease that can damage your eyes, heart, blood vessels and kidneys. Your healthcare provider can help you stay healthy with proper foods, exercise, and sometimes with medicines.

Genetic Diseases

Certain illnesses are passed down in families. Thalassemia and glucose-6-dehydrogenase deficiency are both inherited diseases found more often in Chinese Americans than in others.

a. Thalassemia is a form of mild or severe anemia that affects the red blood cells’ ability to carry oxygen to organs and tissues; it is passed down through families. You may feel very tired for no reason if you have this illness. In some cases, you may sometimes need blood transfusions or other treatments.

b. Glucose-6-dehydrogenase deficiency may be caused by certain medicines, an infection, or even some foods (such as fava beans). Tell your healthcare provider if your urine turns dark or you develop yellow skin and you feel short of breath.

Alcoholism

The number of Chinese Americans with alcoholism is increasing. Most Chinese Americans born in China drink less alcohol than the average American. But Chinese Americans who were born in the US drink more than first-generation Chinese Americans.

Many Chinese have low amounts of an enzyme called acetaldehyde dehydrogenase that is used by the liver to breakdown alcohol. Some people of Chinese descent may experience facial flushing (when the face turns red) and other symptoms when they drink alcohol due to their low enzyme level. Alcohol can damage your liver. It is also dangerous to drink alcohol while on certain medications.

If you drink large amounts of alcohol on a regular basis, talk to your healthcare provider about getting help to quit. For men, heavy drinking is defined as 15 or more drinks per week, and for women, this is 8 drinks or more per week.

Communicating With Your Healthcare Team (healthcare providers, nurses and others)

Good communication between you and your healthcare provider—the physicians, nurse practitioners, nurses, physician assistants and other healthcare professionals you see—is very important to your health.

While your healthcare team may know a lot about medicine, they may not know much about your culture, habits and needs. Sometimes, these differences can make us misunderstand each other, or prevent information from being fully shared. You can receive the best care possible if you are open, honest, and respectful with everyone involved in your healthcare.

Important issues to discuss with your health providers and communication tips

Language

- Tell your healthcare provider if you do not understand or read English well.
- Tell your healthcare provider ahead of time that you will need a medical interpreter who speaks your language or dialect.
- Bring a friend or family member to the appointment who can help and support you. For multiple reasons, healthcare providers will not let your family act as an interpreter.

Sensitive medical information

- Problems with bowel, bladder, sleep, sexual functions and memory are common in older adults. It is important to discuss any personal and intimate problems you have with your healthcare provider as they can help you.
- Medical information is often hard to understand. Ask for an explanation of every term you don't understand and write them down.
- Ask for written materials in your language if they are available.

Medications and side effects

- Bring all your medicines to every appointment so the healthcare provider knows exactly what you are taking.
- Always tell your healthcare professional about:
 - side effects of your medicines
 - if they help you or not
 - if you have stopped taking them or skip them sometimes
 - if you are not following his or her recommendations
 - how you use your medicine
 - if you cannot afford to continue to fill your prescriptions

This is the only way the healthcare provider can tell if the medicine is working or not.

Traditional medicines, herbs and supplements

- Many traditional approaches can be used along with Western medicine, but your healthcare provider needs to know about them.
- Please tell your healthcare provider about all the traditional medicines, herbs or foods that you may be taking. Some Western medicines should not be taken with certain traditional medicines and herbs as they can cause interactions.

Health care decisions and other support

- You have the right to make health decisions for yourself.
- Tell your healthcare provider if you wish to have your family make all of your health care decisions.
- Choose a family member or friend who can make decisions for you in case you are not able to make decisions by yourself.
- Tell your healthcare provider about which of your family members and friends can help to look after you.

Planning for end-of-life care

- An advance directive is a legal document that outlines your wishes concerning medical treatments at the end of life.
- Tell your healthcare provider and your family about what is important to you as you think about the last part of your life.
- If you wish to be pain free and made comfortable at the end of your life, please tell your healthcare provider and ask their help to complete advance directives.

Other Concerns

- Sometimes, older adults are at risk for abuse or mistreatment by people close to them.
- Mistreatment can be physical and/or emotional.
- Sometimes, others may be misusing your money or other property.
- Ask to speak privately with your healthcare providers and tell them about any mistreatment. They can help you.
- Some older adults may feel lonely and isolated. There are many opportunities in the community through senior centers and other organizations to help you. Please speak to your social worker who can help connect you with community resources.