Geriatric Assessments in Older Adults With Cancer

What Is a Geriatric Assessment?
The health and well-being of older adults after a cancer diagnosis differs greatly from one person to another and should be carefully reviewed prior to treatment. Research has shown that management guided by the geriatric assessment (GA) can benefit patients and decrease adverse effects from chemotherapy.

The GA is a set of tools clinicians use to evaluate the health of older adults. It gathers information about health status, well-being, and social support not routinely collected during the workup of a patient with cancer. The GA can facilitate treatment discussions and decisions between the patient and the care team, identify other health conditions, and prevent or delay complications.

What Does the GA Consist Of?
The GA consists of surveys, some administered by the health care team and others completed by the patient, as well as brief tests of physical function. It encompasses 7 health domains that together create a more accurate picture of one's health status and level of support. The GA is often performed in the clinic or hospital and does not involve blood tests or imaging scans.

The domains assessed by the GA include
1. Physical performance/strength (balance, walking, fitness)
2. Functional status, including bathing, dressing, and hygiene
3. Presence of other medical problems and use of medications
4. Cognition, which includes memory, mood, and concentration
5. Psychological status, such as anxiety and depression
6. Nutritional status, current weight, and weight changes
7. Social support in daily life.

What Are the Benefits of Performing a GA?
With the information from the GA, the oncology team can understand an older adult's “functional age” rather than relying on “chronological age.” Chronological age is the number of years someone has been alive. Functional age considers a person's ability to function in daily life from a psychological, physiologic, and social standpoint.

By focusing on functional age, the GA helps identify patients at increased risk of hospitalization, serious adverse effects from chemotherapy, early death, or decline in physical abilities.

Including a GA to weigh the risks and benefits of cancer treatment can ensure the plan aligns with the patient's goals and values, such as optimizing quality of life. Studies show that a GA improves communication between the patient and the care team.

Who Should Have a GA?
Several professional societies recommend that all patients older than 65 years should be evaluated with a GA before starting cancer treatment. In daily practice, administering GA components to every eligible patient requires resources that may not be present in all centers. For this reason, some centers use screening tools instead or collaborate with primary care or geriatrics.

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