

Minimising functional decline

Minimising functional decline of the older person in hospital – information for patients, families and carers

What is functional decline?

Functional decline is the reduced ability to perform everyday activities of daily living, due to a decrease in physical function or thinking processes. Older people are at risk of functional decline during hospitalisation as early as the second day of their admission.

Functional decline can include problems such as reduced mobility, weakness, incontinence, under-nutrition, compromised skin condition and difficulties with mental alertness.

Functional decline in the older person can impede recovery, increase the length of time in hospital and affect a person's ability to return to their preferred destination after hospital.

Functional decline can be prevented or minimised during hospital using some simple strategies. This fact sheet outlines practical ways in which you and your family can help to minimise the risk of functional decline and increase independence during your hospital stay.

Person-centred care



We recognise that every person is different, so please let us know about any wishes or concerns you have to help us care for you in hospital. Please ask any questions during your stay to ensure you understand what is happening.

Assessment



We need to assess you comprehensively and several health professionals will meet you during your stay. It is important for you and your family to provide complete information about your health. It is particularly important for us to know how you were managing before coming to hospital so that we can help you.

Mobility, vigour and self-care



Sit out of bed as often as possible. Do strengthening exercises or go for a walk, as instructed by your physiotherapist.

Bring in appropriate footwear, preferably with an enclosed heel and a non-slip sole. Check your footwear with a podiatrist and ask staff about other ways you can reduce your risk of falls.

Make sure you bring in your glasses and hearing aids if you use them.

Participate as much as possible in your personal care, as this is a good form of exercise. If you are having difficulty, an occupational therapist may be able to help with strategies or equipment.

Nutrition



Adequate nutrition in hospital is important for recovery. If you have poor appetite or have lost weight unintentionally, please ask to see a dietitian. A dietitian can help to arrange nourishing snacks and nutrition supplement drinks. They can also help arrange food to meet your personal or cultural needs.

When your nurse weighs you, ask how much you weigh. If you have not been weighed, please ask your nurse.

Try to sit out of bed for meals. If you need assistance at meal times, please ask for help. A blue dome can be ordered for your meal tray. This acts as a visual alert telling staff that you need help with your meal. Also consider asking your family to visit at meal times so that they can provide additional help with your meal.

Confusion and delirium



Sometimes being in hospital can make older people become confused. If your family notices a change in your thinking and/or behaviour, it is important that they tell staff. Your family can assist by visiting as often as possible and bringing in familiar belongings or reading the newspaper with you. Ask nursing staff for a more detailed information brochure about delirium.

Dementia



If you have been diagnosed with dementia and cannot communicate your needs, it is important that your family lets staff know what interests and needs you have so that you can be best cared for in hospital.

Sadness and depression



Depression is a complex combination of behaviours, thoughts and feelings. If you or your family are concerned about changes in your mood or thoughts, please speak with your doctor.

If you are feeling sad, family can help by providing encouragement and motivation.

Continence



Bring in your continence aids if used at home. Familiarise yourself with the location of the toilet. If you have any concerns regarding your continence, please raise this with your nurse or doctor.

Medication



Bring in your medications or an up-to-date list of your current tablets from home. A pharmacist will discuss any medication changes with you. If you have any concerns about managing your medication, please discuss these with the pharmacist.

Skin integrity



To help reduce your risk of pressure injuries in hospital, check your skin daily and notify staff if you have concerns. Avoid use of drying soaps and use moisturiser for dry skin.

Notify your nurse of any existing wounds and how often they are dressed.

Remember...

Keeping active while you are in hospital promotes your independence.

Please ask staff if you have any further questions during your hospital stay.