

Adult Geriatric Muscle Disease

Condition: Geriatric muscle diseases include several conditions that affect older adults. The most common type is called sarcopenia, meaning a loss of muscle mass and strength. Much less common are muscle diseases caused by inflammation, infections, toxins, or genetic factors.

Background: More than 20% of people over age 70 have sarcopenia. The other types of muscle disease are less frequent and may occur at earlier ages. Statin drugs, which are taken by many people to lower cholesterol, can cause muscle disease in about 5% of those taking the medication.

Risk Factors: Sarcopenia is usually caused by poor nutrition or low activity. Other possible causes include chronic diseases and low hormone levels.

History and Symptoms: Muscle weakness may appear either suddenly, over weeks or months, or gradually over many years. If it appears suddenly, it may be related to other conditions or medications.

Physical Exam: The physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R) physician will try to find out which muscles are weak since the pattern of weakness may suggest the cause. The PM&R physician will also test reflexes and your ability to sense a pin prick or other stimulus. This is done to rule out problems that are brain-based rather than muscle-based.

Diagnostic Process: To diagnose muscle disease the PM&R physician will test your ability to move, stand up, walk, dress yourself, and do tasks that use your hands and fingers. Blood tests can show if you have inflammation, a genetic disease, or low hormone or vitamin D levels. A type of X-ray called DEXA, or MRI, CT, or ultrasound scans may also be done. Sometimes tests of electrical activity in the muscle, or a muscle biopsy may be done.

Rehab Management: The PM&R physician may recommend exercise or physical therapy and an improved diet which can improve strength and mobility. Depending on the cause, hormone therapy or anti-inflammatory drugs may also be used.

Other Resources for Patients and Families: Families can help by getting patients to take part in physical activities and exercise programs and eat a healthy diet.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is PM&R?

Physical medicine and rehabilitation (PM&R), also known as physiatry, is a primary medical specialty that aims to enhance and restore functional ability and improve quality of life to those with injuries, physical impairments or disabilities affecting the brain, spinal cord, nerves, bones, joints, ligaments, muscles and tendons. PM&R physicians, known as physiatrists, evaluate and treat the whole body, maximize patients' independence in their daily life and are experts in designing comprehensive, patient-centered treatment plans to empower patients to achieve their goals. By taking the whole body into account, they can accurately pin-point problems, decrease pain, assist in recovery from devastating injuries and maximize overall outcomes and performance with non-surgical and peri-surgical options. To learn more, visit www.aapmr.org/aboutpmr.

What makes PM&R physicians unique?

PM&R physicians' training focuses not just on treating medical conditions, but on enhancing the patient's performance and quality of life in the context of those medical conditions. They focus not only on one part of the body, but instead on the development of a comprehensive program for putting the pieces of a person's life back together – medically, socially, emotionally and vocationally – after injury or disease. PM&R physicians make and manage medical diagnoses, design a treatment plan and prescribe the therapies that physical therapists or other allied therapists perform or that are carried out by the patients themselves. By providing an appropriate treatment plan, PM&R physicians help patients stay as active as possible at any age. Their broad medical expertise allows them to treat disabling conditions throughout a person's lifetime.

Why see a PM&R physician?

A PM&R physician will thoroughly assess your condition, needs, and expectations and rule out any serious medical illnesses to develop a treatment plan. By understanding your condition and goals, you and your PM&R physician can develop a treatment plan suited to your unique needs.

How do I find a PM&R physician near me?

Visit www.aapmr.org/findapmrphysician or contact your primary care physician for a referral.