



## Chronic Illness: Risks and Impact

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After reading the newsletter, the home health aide should be able to:

1. Define chronic illness.
2. Describe the incidence of chronic illness in the US.
3. Discuss risks for chronic illness and effects on the client and family.

Chronic illnesses, such as heart disease, cancer and diabetes, affect the lives of millions of Americans. Approximately half of all adults in the US have at least one chronic illness, and 25% have two or more. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), chronic illness is the leading cause of death and disability in the US, causing 7 out of 10 deaths each year. These conditions are also responsible for a large majority of healthcare costs in the US. Close to 90% of all healthcare dollars in the US are spent on people having chronic illnesses, totaling hundreds of billions of dollars annually.



This newsletter will discuss chronic illness, including risk factors for illness and its impact on the client and family. The role of the home health aide in working with clients having chronic illness will also be highlighted.

### What is Chronic Illness?

Chronic illnesses are defined by the CDC as conditions lasting more than a year and requiring ongoing medical attention, and/or resulting in decreased ability to perform daily activities. These include physical medical conditions, mental health disorders, and developmental disabilities. Specific chronic health conditions include:

High blood pressure	Diabetes
Heart failure	Arthritis
Heart disease	Cancer
High cholesterol	Stroke
Chronic liver disease	Obesity
Emphysema	Asthma
Chronic kidney disease	Epilepsy
Parkinson's disease	Dementia
Multiple sclerosis	Autism
Substance abuse	Depression

Most chronic illnesses cannot be cured. However, in many cases, they are preventable, or can be well-managed with proper medical treatment and lifestyle changes.

### Causes and Risk Factors

Why do some people develop chronic illnesses, and others don't? The answer is complex and not well-understood. Most chronic illnesses are believed to be a combination of internal factors, such as a person's biology and genetics, and external factors, such as the environment. Many chronic conditions have genetic and biologic factors that cause a person to be more likely to develop them. When these internal factors are combined with certain environmental factors, such as unhealthy lifestyle choices, the risk for chronic illness increases greatly.

Internal factors that may promote development of chronic disease include viruses and other infections, an overactive immune system,

inherited genes, brain abnormalities, and changes in the body due to stress. It is important to understand that these internal factors do not always result in illness on their own. Environmental factors may be necessary to trigger chronic disease. For example, a person whose genes puts them at risk for diabetes or cancer may never develop these conditions if healthy lifestyle choices are made.

Environmental factors that increase the risk of chronic illness include poor nutrition, lack of exercise, tobacco use, and excessive use of alcohol. A diet low in fruits and vegetables and high in junk food, sugar, and empty calories is associated with obesity, diabetes and cancer.



Lack of exercise increases the risk of obesity, heart disease, stroke, diabetes, dementia and cancer. Use of tobacco can cause emphysema, heart disease and a variety of cancers. Excessive alcohol use increases the risk of liver disease and cancers of the mouth and throat.

Also, having a chronic illness may significantly increase the risk of developing additional chronic illnesses. For example, obesity increases the risk of diabetes, high blood pressure, cancer and liver disease. Chronic liver diseases, such as hepatitis and cirrhosis, increase the risk of liver cancer. Having to deal with the difficulties of a chronic illness may result in depression.

### Impact on the Client & Family- How You Can Help

Chronic illness causes not only physical health issues, but can greatly affect the client's and family's psychological, social, cultural and financial state. These effects may include:

**Disability:** Many chronic illnesses can cause disability. The client experiencing a stroke may lose the ability to speak or walk; a client with diabetes may lose his/her eyesight; pain due to arthritis may limit a client's ability to perform daily activities. According to the CDC, arthritis is the leading cause of disability in the US. Disability impacts the life of the client and family tremendously. Not only is the client unable to perform his/her normal role in the household, but the role of family members also changes, as they must adapt to and assist the client. Disability can produce feelings of anger, hopelessness, sadness, fear and low self-esteem.

When working with clients having disabilities, you can help to boost self-esteem by promoting independence— avoid performing tasks that the client could do for him/herself. Offer praise for effort and attempts at independence.

**Sedentary lifestyle:** Even for people who were previously very active, a chronic illness can reduce

mobility, energy and motivation. The resulting inactivity can worsen the client's physical condition, causing possible weight gain, progressive muscle weakness, bone loss and blood clots in the legs. Follow activity orders to help the client to be as active as possible, such as regular ambulation and range of motion exercises.

**Dependence:** Chronic illness can cause the client to become more dependent on others for personal care, transportation, shopping and other daily activities. This can be very difficult for the client to accept, and may decrease feelings of self-worth. The client may feel like a burden to others. Encourage the client to discuss his/her feelings and identify tasks that can be done independently.

**Financial difficulty:** The healthcare costs associated with a chronic illness can cause real hardship for some families. This difficulty is worsened if the client cannot work due to the illness, or a family member must stop working to provide care. If this concern is voiced, let the nurse know, so that help can be arranged through social services.

**Social isolation:** The client's ability to leave the home may be reduced, decreasing the opportunities to interact with others. Family members who provide care may also feel this effect if they cannot leave the client. Family and friends of the client may not visit or call as often, perhaps because they feel uncomfortable, afraid, or don't know what to say.

To help increase social contact, the client and/or family member can be encouraged to reach out to friends and relatives by phone call, video chat or other types of communication. You can also help to provide social interaction by talking with the client about areas of interest to him/her.

**Psychological changes:** The changes in function, ability and lifestyle required by some chronic illnesses require a high degree of coping to adjust. This can be a difficult process, causing feelings of depression, anxiety, loss of control, helplessness, and overwhelming stress for clients and families.



If your client wants to talk about his/her situation or feelings, listen carefully. As always, avoid making unhelpful comments like, "You'll be fine." or "Everything happens for a reason." Visits from friends or a religious leader may boost your client's spirits. Let the nurse know if your client seems anxious or depressed, such as talking about feeling nervous, sad or worthless, since additional help may be needed.

Chronic illness affects every aspect of the client's and family's life. Your attention to the needs of the client and family helps them to cope at this difficult time.



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NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

Directions: Place the letter of the one best answer in the space provided.

- \_\_\_\_1. According to the CDC, the majority of deaths in the US are caused by chronic illness.  
A. True  
B. False
  
- \_\_\_\_2. Which of the following is NOT part of the definition of chronic illness?  
A. lasts for one year or longer  
B. decreases the ability to perform daily functions  
C. results in death within 10-20 years  
D. requires ongoing medical attention
  
- \_\_\_\_3. Chronic illnesses include which of the following types of conditions?  
A. mental health disorders  
B. physical conditions  
C. developmental disabilities  
D. all of the above
  
- \_\_\_\_4. Chronic illnesses cannot be prevented or cured.  
A. True  
B. False
  
- \_\_\_\_5. Most chronic illnesses are believed to be caused by:  
A. increasing age  
B. lack of close family ties and poor social support  
C. childhood health problems  
D. genetic and environmental factors

- \_\_\_6. Lack of exercise increases the risk of all of the following EXCEPT:
- A. hepatitis
  - B. stroke
  - C. dementia
  - D. diabetes
- \_\_\_7. Having a chronic illness significantly increases the risk of developing another chronic illness.
- A. True
  - B. False
- \_\_\_8. According to the CDC, the leading cause of disability in the US is:
- A. heart disease
  - B. diabetes
  - C. arthritis
  - D. stroke
- \_\_\_9. Effects of chronic illness, such as financial difficulty and social isolation, can affect not only clients, but their family members as well.
- A. True
  - B. False
- \_\_\_10. Mrs. Carter, who has kidney disease, tells the home health aide, “I’m of no use to my husband and children any more—I’m just a burden.” The home health aide should:
- A. reassure Mrs. Carter that her husband and children love her
  - B. change the subject, to avoid upsetting Mrs. Carter further
  - C. help Mrs. Carter plan ways that she can do more around the house
  - D. notify the nurse, since Mrs. Carter may have depression

