

How to help your frail older relative

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[SGS Video](#)

Your older relative has several health issues, but they have been able to look after themselves in their own home. Lately though, you have noticed that they seem forgetful, tired and weak. You worry that they aren't remembering to take their many medications, and are afraid that they might fall. You are not sure how to help.

What is frailty?

The Canadian Frailty Network defines frailty as “a state of increased vulnerability, with reduced physical reserve and loss of function across multiple body systems”. Most older adults live healthy, active lives, and are able to “age in place” - stay in their own homes - with some support. However, a small percentage become frail. With frailty, comes the risk of not being able to “bounce back” from stressors, such as respiratory illnesses, or a change in medication. It can lead to avoidable hospitalization, or result in premature admissions to a long term care home.

How do you know if they need help?

Changes in physical or mental status, or a decline in personal hygiene or in managing the household could all signal that help is needed. If you have concerns about your relative's health or ability to manage at home, it is best to have a conversation with them, and seek help together. Older adults living with frailty have multiple and complex needs requiring a comprehensive assessment and a targeted treatment plan to optimize their function and independence.

Where do you start?

You know there must be services available, but the healthcare system is vast and complex. A good place to start is by speaking with your relative's family doctor. Together you and your relative can discuss concerns and challenges, and can ask if a referral to specialized geriatric services would be appropriate.

What are specialized geriatric services (SGS)?

Among health care services, the Regional Geriatric Program's specialized geriatric services (SGS) are unique in being focused on assessing and optimizing the function of older adults living with frailty. SGS are a spectrum of hospital and community-based health care services delivered by interprofessional teams across Ontario. Teams may comprise: doctor, nurse, social worker, physiotherapist, occupational therapist, dietician, pharmacist, and other health professions.

SGS that your older relative may be referred to at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre include:

- **Geriatric Day Hospital** – An interprofessional team assesses the client and designs an individualized treatment program based on their goals and abilities. The client attends the program once or twice a week, for several hours a day, for several weeks. Upon discharge from the program, the client receives referrals to other community programs as required.
- **Falls Prevention Clinic** – A geriatrician and physiotherapist assess older adults who are having falls or at risk for falls. The client attends the six-week, group exercise program which is designed to improve strength, balance and gait. Education sessions are also provided and include information about home safety, home exercises and safe medication practices.
- **Geriatric Outpatient Clinic** – A Geriatrician and interprofessional team provide assessment, treatment and/or disease monitoring for older adults in a clinic setting. The clinic can provide sporadic, short-term (a few weeks), or ongoing (over many months) services to clients in partnership with their primary care provider.
- **Geriatric Outreach Team** – An interprofessional team assesses homebound older adults who have complex problems related to health, day-to-day functioning and social concerns. Recommendations and referrals are made to improve the patient's level of health, overall functioning and independence.

Being mindful and alert to changes, having proactive conversations, seeking help early, and getting referrals to appropriate services are all meaningful ways in which you can help your frail older relative achieve their personal goals, build resilience, and optimize their function and independence.

For more information about SGS, watch the 1.5 min video above, or [click here](#) to read more.