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Older adults face health risks during disasters

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During a disaster, physiological changes associated with aging and the presence of chronic illness make older adults more vulnerable to illness, injury and even death, according to a study.

Investigators with the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing followed 17 long-term care residents, with an average age of 86, who were evacuated for five days due to a severe summer storm and were relocated to different facilities with different care providers and physical surroundings. The displaced participants experienced delirium, cognitive changes, hospitalizations and death, according to research published in the Journal of Gerontological Nursing.

"Older adults often have visual and hearing deficits, making it more difficult to interpret their environments and precipitating increased stress," said lead author Pamela Cacchione, APRN, PhD, GNP, BC. "This stress can also exacerbate chronic illnesses, further precipitating delirium."

The 17 participants were part of a broader intervention study testing the effectiveness of a nursing intervention to improve vision and hearing impairment and decrease incident delirium and other outcomes.

As part of the parent study, residents were measured with four different tests: the MMSE, a 30-item mental status test that includes questions on orientation, language, attention and recall; the GDS, a 30-item, interview-based depression rating scale requiring yes or no responses; the NEECHAM, a 9-item nurse-rated scale that includes the participant's vital signs and pulse and is designed to assess for acute confusion or delirium; and the mCAM, another delirium assessment tool that includes tasks to assess attention.

The participants were all screened with the NEECHAM and the mCAM on the day of the severe storm and three times a week. The scores were compared with their Week One scores.

"This study provided documentation of what clinicians have known for some time, but such anecdotal accounts are seldom documented," Cacchione said. "Unexpected relocation often leads to poor outcomes for nursing home residents."

The study, published in September 2011 issue, found that more than half the residents were negatively affected by evacuation immediately following. Two participants were hospitalized and one died.

"Nurses in all care settings, not just LTC sites, should be aware of the potential difficulties older adults may experience as a result of relocations occur," Cacchione said. "Basic physical care, ongoing assessment of chronic conditions, medication management and valued objects should be facilitated as soon as possible."

To read the study abstract, visit <http://www.slackjournals.com/article.aspx?rid=84189>.

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