Elderly Patients With Diabetes, Hypertension at Risk of Overtreatment

November 10, 2015

Older folks living with diabetes, hypertension and other common geriatric (a.k.a. old-age–related) health issues might want to ask their doctors to reassess their drug therapies. New findings published in JAMA Internal Medicine warn that strict control of blood sugar and blood pressure levels with meds for folks older than 70 may be doing their health more harm than good, The New York Times reports.

For the study, researchers reviewed health data on more than 211,000 patients older than 70 in the government's Veterans Affairs program. Scientists found that fewer than 19 percent of patients determined to have very low (and potentially dangerous) blood pressure were told to cut back on their medications. Similarly, only 27 percent of patients diagnosed with very low blood sugar (putting them at risk of hypotension) were told to scale back their diabetes drugs.

"As you get older, the benefits go down and the risks go up," said Sei Lee, MD, a geriatrician at the University of California, San Francisco, who has written extensively about aging and overtreatment. "What was good for you at 55 might be bad for you at 75."

In addition, Lee and other experts said most older patients don't have to get their blood sugar down to rock-bottom levels. These docs suggested that a 7.5 or 8 percent blood glucose level is a more reasonable goal. What's more, heart health experts also recently recommended blood pressure goals be raised from a 140 millimeter systolic (the top number) reading to 150 mm for some older patients.

In general, experts warn blood pressure or blood glucose levels that are too low can often put seniors at increased risk of fatigue, dizziness and potentially fatal falls—something their younger counterparts may not have to take into account.

For more information about why it might be OK for older folks to have higher blood pressure levels, click here.

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