

Under-Recognition of Weight Loss in Community-Dwelling Elders

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Intentional and unintentional weight loss has been shown to produce negative outcomes in morbidity and mortality in older populations, even in the overweight. Because weight loss may portend adverse outcomes, its recognition is clinically relevant. This study sought to identify the scope of under-recognition of weight loss in the elderly.

The electronic database of a community-based health network was used to retrospectively identify patients age 70 and older who sustained a 5% weight loss during a 12-month time span. Data included age, gender, height and weights, documentation by the physician of weight loss and the number of missed opportunities to document weight loss. Patients were excluded if cancer was an active problem or if weights were not measured at least twice in a year.

A total of 2387 charts were reviewed, 439 were excluded, and 1948 charts met inclusion criteria. These included charts from 143 different physicians. Weight loss occurred in 643 patients; 37% were recognized, but 63% were not. If weight loss was initially unnoticed, there was an average of 2.3 missed opportunities and 4.7 months that elapsed before its recognition.

In this sample, weight loss in elderly outpatients was unrecognized in the majority of cases. Only a small number of providers identified the majority of weight loss cases. Even with the use of an electronic medical record, most providers did not document the acknowledgement of weight loss. Given the problems associated with weight loss, its under-recognition could potentially have serious consequences in the elderly.