

Use of equipment like catheters puts them at risk of getting UTIs Managing urinary infections in old age

Urinary tract infections (UTIs) could be common among women, girls and children, but the elderly are not safe either. There are several factors to explain this, writes Jacqueline Nakandi

Eighty-eight-year-old Margaret Nakayira, a resident of Bweyogerere on the outskirts of Kampala, says her health was not that bad until she began feeling pain in her lower abdomen and could no longer ease herself well due to the excessive pain.

"I thought it was just a minor issue that, with time, the pain would eventually stop. I even took painkillers but in vain," she recalls.

Nakayira explains that she decided to visit a doctor and discovered that she was suffering from a UTI. This was a surprise to her because she thought UTIs only affect young people.

WHAT ARE UTIS

A UTI affects any part of the urinary system like kidneys, ureters, bladder and urethra and it is common among girls, pregnant women and the elderly. However, it is very difficult to detect among the old adults because they do not present with common signs as in the young people.

Elderly persons aged 60 and above are at a high risk.

Daniel Kiggundu, a doctor of internal medicine at Mulago Hospital, says urine formation starts from the kidneys, and later it is passed to the ureters that connect to the bladder and then it is passed out through the urethra. This is the urinary system affected by UTIs.

Harriet Nankabirwa, a geriatrician (physician for elderly) at Nakasero Hospital, says infection of the urinary system involves both the lower (urinary bladder and urethra) and upper (kidneys and ureters) urinary tracts.

"The main cause of UTIs is bacteria such as *E. coli*, *Staphylococcus* and *Enterococci*. *E. coli* being the commonest organism of all and this can be got from stool," she says.

WHO IS AT RISK?

According to Nankabirwa, people of all age groups are at risk of catching UTI but in old age both men and women aged 60 and above can catch UTI.

She adds that women are more prone to getting such infections simply because they have a shorter urethra.

Michael Ssonko, another physician, says as women age, their hormones change, leading to loss of estrogen and making them prone to UTI. He adds that it is also common in people with diabetes.

Kiggundu also says even elderly men are at a higher risk of getting UTI than when they are still middle-aged. As they age, their prostate gland enlarges, hence blocking the complete emptying of the bladder.

"The little urine that remains in the bladder becomes a perfect ground for bacteria to thrive, resulting in an infection," he explains.

Nankabirwa adds that hospitalised elderly people are also more likely to suffer from UTI because of the urinary bladder catheters inserted in them to help them pass out urine.

She explains that introducing a foreign body into some one's body makes it easier for an elderly person to get UTI.

"Five days after being inserted in a catheter, he or she can be diagnosed with UTI," she says.

Nankabirwa says advanced age and reduced immunity are risk factors because as one grows older, their immunity reduces.

PRESENTATION

Ssonko says symptoms of UTI in elderly present differently because of the change in their body system.

He adds that an elderly person may develop fever,



Drinking plenty of fluids and taking fruits flushes out bacteria causing UTIs among the elderly

frequent urination, reduced mobility and dizziness, which lead to falls.

The most common sign of UTI in the elderly is confusion. Nankabirwa explains that their behaviour can change abruptly from their normal mentation. They develop urine

incontinence, passing urine out before reaching the bathroom and also start passing urine in bed at night.

Ssonko says an elderly person may get lower abdominal pain, burning sensation on urination, foul smelling urine and fever.

TREATMENT

According to Nankabirwa, in older adults, UTI is treated only when an older adult has both symptoms of UTI and bacteria in urine. Antibiotics are the mainstay of treatment. However, choose antibiotics that are sensitive to the microorganisms detected and

seek medicinal advice before using them. "Elderly people always have bacteria in their urine. Without symptoms, do not treat," she emphasises.

She adds that before offering treatment, first diagnose them by analysing symptoms, doing a urinalysis, culture and sensitivity.

PREVENTION

Michael Ssonko, a physician, says a carer should make sure an elderly person drinks plenty of fluids so that they can flush out bacteria causing UTI.

"They should have the fluids before 6:00pm to avoid interruptions in their sleep at night because of the urge to visit the bathrooms," he advises.

Elderly people should also avoid urinary bladder irritants like caffeine and alcohol. And also urinate as soon as they feel the urge

to help sweep out bacteria hence reducing on the risk of the infection.

Harriet Nankabirwa, a Geriatrician, attributes UTI to reluctant changing of diapers in elderly. She advises carers to at least change their diapers after three to four hours of use. She adds that carers should keep the elderly's genital areas clean. However, Ssonko advises that while cleaning the elderly, a carer should clean them from front to back, mainly women.



Always seek advice before using antibiotics to avoid side effects

The connection between UTIs and dementia

In older people with dementia, urinary tract infections (UTIs) can cause sudden behavior changes rather than the common physical symptoms. Knowing the signs of UTIs in older people can help your loved one get treated early, before the infection leads to serious health problems.

When younger people get a urinary tract infection, they will experience

distinct physical symptoms. Most commonly, painful urination, an increased need to urinate, lower abdominal pain, back pain on one side, fever and chills.

But those same symptoms may not be present for an older adult. Because our immune system changes as we get older, it responds differently to the infection. Instead of pain symptoms,

seniors with a UTI may show increased signs of confusion, agitation or withdrawal.

For older adults who have dementia, these behavioral changes may come across as part of that condition or signs of advanced aging. If the underlying UTI goes unrecognised and untreated for too long, it can spread to the bloodstream and become life-

threatening. UTIs can exacerbate dementia symptoms, but a UTI does not necessarily signal dementia. UTIs can cause distressing behaviour changes for a person with dementia. These changes, referred to as delirium, can develop in as little as one to two days. Symptoms of delirium can range from agitation and restlessness to hallucinations or delusions.