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MYASTHENIA GRAVIS ESSENTIALS: A GUIDE FOR OLDER ADULTS

As we age, managing a condition such as myasthenia gravis (MG) can come with unique challenges. Muscle weakness, fatigue, and coexisting conditions may affect daily life differently for older individuals than for younger ones. Additionally, factors such as menopause, polypharmacy (taking multiple medications), and mobility concerns can influence symptom management.

This guide is designed to help older adults with MG navigate these challenges with practical advice on treatment options, lifestyle adjustments, and strategies to maintain independence and well-being. This guide also includes a **consultation companion**, providing useful questions to help you feel supported and prepared during medical appointments.

For general information about MG, read **Myasthenia gravis essentials: a guide for adults**



MG in older adults

MG is a chronic autoimmune disease that affects the connection between nerves and muscles, causing muscle weakness. MG can occur at any age, but its prevalence is increasing among older adults. Some people develop MG later in life (late-onset MG), whereas others develop it when they are younger (early-onset MG).

Older adults with MG may face additional challenges, including:

- ▶ Increased risk of misdiagnosis due to symptoms overlapping with other conditions
- ▶ Greater difficulty tolerating certain treatments due to age-related health changes
- ▶ Higher risk of side effects from medications
- ▶ More frequent hospital visits due to exacerbations or infections

However, with knowledge and the right support from your healthcare team, you can maintain a good quality of life and manage your symptoms.



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Managing MG as you age



Medication management

Many older adults take multiple medications for different conditions, which can increase the risk of drug interactions. Some medications can worsen MG symptoms or interact with MG treatments. It is important to:

- ▶ Use a **pill organizer** to keep track of medications
- ▶ Review your medications regularly with your healthcare provider and make sure that you are aware of potential interactions between medications
- ▶ Let your MG specialist know if you need to start new medications for other conditions
- ▶ Be aware of medications that may worsen MG, such as certain antibiotics, beta-blockers, and muscle relaxants
- ▶ **Not stop or reduce** any medications without speaking to your healthcare provider first – stopping medication suddenly can worsen symptoms or lead to complications
- ▶ Keep an up-to-date list of all your current medications, as well as a list of drugs that should be avoided or used with caution in MG, and share these lists with all your healthcare providers



Mobility and fall prevention

Muscle weakness from MG, combined with age-related changes in balance and strength, can increase the risk of falls. To stay mobile and safe, you can:

- ▶ Use mobility aids (e.g., canes or walkers), if needed
- ▶ Arrange fall-proofing measures at home, such as grab bars in the bathroom and non-slip rugs
- ▶ Engage in gentle exercises, such as stretching or physical therapy, if possible, to maintain strength



Steroid use and bone health

Long-term use of corticosteroids (a common MG treatment) can weaken bones and increase fracture risk. When combined with age-related changes in bone density, you may need to do a few extra things to support your bone health as an older adult:

- ▶ Ensure adequate calcium and **vitamin D intake**
- ▶ Discuss **bone density testing** with your doctor
- ▶ Engage in **weight-bearing exercises within your limits**, if possible
- ▶ Speak to your healthcare provider if you are concerned about your bone health



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Cardiovascular health

The risk of cardiovascular disease increases as we age. Corticosteroids and other immunosuppressants may increase the risk of high blood pressure, diabetes, and heart disease. It is important to look after your heart health by:

- ▶ Having regular **blood pressure and cholesterol checks**
- ▶ Eating a **healthy diet** that supports heart health
- ▶ Staying active within your limits

Recognizing exacerbations and myasthenic crises

MG symptoms can fluctuate. Flare ups are exacerbations of MG symptoms, that can be difficult to distinguish from normal symptom variation and other conditions that you may have. Signs of a flare-up may include:

- ▶ Worsening muscle weakness, especially in the arms, legs, or neck
- ▶ Increased difficulty with speech, chewing, or swallowing
- ▶ More frequent episodes of double vision or drooping eyelids
- ▶ Increased shortness of breath or difficulty breathing

A **myasthenic crisis** is a severe and potentially life-threatening flare-up that happens if breathing muscles are too weak to function properly, resulting in the need for a ventilator to breathe. It is important to seek immediate medical attention if you experience:

- ▶ Significant shortness of breath or difficulty taking a deep breath
- ▶ Trouble speaking clearly due to weakness
- ▶ Severe difficulty swallowing, leading to choking or aspiration

Always have an emergency plan in place, and discuss with your healthcare provider what steps to take if symptoms worsen suddenly.



Consultation companion

When managing MG as an older person, open communication with your healthcare provider and multidisciplinary team is key. Age-related changes in muscle strength, bone health, and medication tolerance can influence how MG affects you over time. Asking the right questions helps you understand how to adapt your treatment plan and maintain your overall well-being. Here are some example questions to get you started:

My questions	My answers
How might my age affect my MG treatment options?	
Are there any drug interactions I should be aware of?	
How can I safely manage muscle weakness and prevent falls?	
What steps should I take to protect my bone and heart health?	
What should I do if I suspect an exacerbation or myasthenic crisis?	
Is there any extra support available to me as an older person?	
How can I maintain my mental health and well-being while managing MG?	
<i>My question 1</i>	
<i>My question 2</i>	



Looking for support?

Connecting with others in similar situations can offer valuable advice, comfort, and a sense of community. Patient advocacy groups can provide vital information about MG, and many have platforms or support groups where you can connect with others. You can also ask your healthcare provider about any local groups you could join.

Myasthenia Gravis Foundation of America

<https://myasthenia.org/>

European Myasthenia Gravis Association

<https://www.eumga.eu/>

MyAware (UK)

<https://www.myaware.org/>

Myasthenia Gravis Association

<http://www.mgakc.org/>