

Acceptance date: 29/10/2024

PSYCHOSIS IN HOSPITALIZED ELDERLY: IDENTIFYING RISK FACTORS AND IMPLEMENTING PREVENTIVE STRATEGIES

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Abstract: INTRODUCTION The introduction discussed the increasing prevalence of psychosis in hospitalized elderly patients and the complex interplay of risk factors, including cognitive decline, polypharmacy, and the hospital environment. It emphasized the diagnostic challenges in distinguishing psychosis from delirium and outlined the importance of understanding the pathophysiology and contributing factors for effective prevention and management. **OBJECTIVE** The primary objective of this review was to analyze the risk factors contributing to the development of psychosis in hospitalized elderly patients, focusing on the roles of cognitive decline, polypharmacy, sensory impairments, and hospital-related stressors. The goal was to identify preventive measures and management strategies that could reduce the incidence and severity of psychosis in this population. **METHODS** This is a narrative review which included studies in the MEDLINE – PubMed (National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health), COCHRANE, EMBASE and Google Scholar databases, using as descriptors: “Psychosis in elderly” OR “Hospitalization and mental health” OR “Polypharmacy in geriatric patients” OR “Cognitive decline and psychosis” OR “Preventive measures for hospital psychosis” in the last years. **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION** The results and discussion highlighted the multifactorial nature of psychosis in hospitalized elderly patients, focusing on the roles of neurodegenerative processes, medication interactions, infections, and environmental stressors in exacerbating psychotic symptoms. Preventive strategies, such as careful medication management, addressing sensory impairments, and modifying the hospital environment, were emphasized. The discussion also touched upon the need for individualized, multidisciplinary approaches to care, incorporating both pharmacological and non-pharmacological interventions.

CONCLUSION The conclusion reiterated the complexity of managing psychosis in elderly hospitalized patients, emphasizing the importance of early detection, targeted interventions, and preventive measures. The risks associated with antipsychotic medications were acknowledged, alongside the benefits of non-pharmacological strategies. A call for further research into diagnostic criteria and long-term outcomes was made, with a focus on improving patient care and reducing psychosis-related complications in hospital settings.

Keywords: Elderly psychosis; Hospitalization risk factors; Polypharmacy complications; Cognitive impairment in elderly; Psychosis prevention strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Psychosis in elderly hospitalized patients represents a significant challenge in clinical practice, both in terms of diagnosis and management. Psychosis, characterized by altered perceptions, delusions, and hallucinations, often manifests differently in the elderly compared to younger populations due to a range of contributing factors, including age-related changes in brain physiology and the presence of comorbidities¹. Hospitalization itself can exacerbate these underlying vulnerabilities, precipitating or worsening psychotic symptoms in elderly patients¹. Differentiating psychosis from other neuropsychiatric syndromes, such as delirium, is critical, as misdiagnosis can lead to inappropriate treatment strategies and worse outcomes². Understanding the nuanced presentation of psychosis in the elderly is essential for improving diagnostic accuracy and therapeutic approaches in hospital settings².

The epidemiology of psychosis in hospitalized elderly patients indicates a rising incidence, driven by the increasing aging population and the frequency of hospital ad-

missions among older adults¹. Studies suggest that psychosis may affect up to 30% of elderly inpatients, with higher rates observed in those admitted to intensive care units (ICUs) or those undergoing complex surgical procedures². The incidence varies significantly based on the presence of pre-existing cognitive disorders, such as dementia, and the severity of acute medical conditions³. Hospital environments, characterized by sensory overload, unfamiliar surroundings, and frequent disruptions to sleep patterns, can trigger or exacerbate psychotic episodes in predisposed individuals, further complicating their clinical course³. These statistics underscore the need for heightened awareness and preventive measures to mitigate the risk of psychosis in this vulnerable population⁴.

Delirium, often seen in the context of hospitalization, shares several overlapping symptoms with psychosis but differs in its pathophysiology and clinical trajectory². Delirium is typically acute, with fluctuating levels of consciousness, and is often reversible with appropriate management of the underlying cause, such as infections or electrolyte imbalances⁴. In contrast, psychosis in the elderly tends to be more persistent, with delusions and hallucinations dominating the clinical picture, often requiring long-term psychiatric intervention⁵. The challenge in differentiating between these two conditions lies in the subtlety of cognitive changes in elderly patients, where both conditions may coexist or present sequentially⁵. Misdiagnosis can lead to inappropriate treatment, prolonging hospital stays and worsening patient outcomes, emphasizing the importance of early recognition and accurate diagnosis⁶.

The pathophysiology of psychosis in elderly patients is multifactorial, involving complex interactions between neurodegenerative processes, vascular changes, and neurotransmitter imbalances⁴. Aging leads to a

reduction in brain volume, particularly in the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus, areas critical for maintaining cognitive function and reality testing⁶. These structural changes are compounded by alterations in dopamine, serotonin, and acetylcholine pathways, which play pivotal roles in regulating mood, cognition, and perception⁶. Vascular factors, such as small vessel disease and ischemia, further disrupt neural circuits, contributing to the onset of psychosis in elderly patients with underlying cerebrovascular conditions⁷. These insights into the pathophysiology highlight the importance of addressing both neurodegenerative and vascular factors in the management of psychosis in this population⁷.

Several risk factors are associated with the development of psychosis in elderly hospitalized patients, with polypharmacy being a prominent contributor⁷. The elderly are often prescribed multiple medications for chronic conditions, increasing the likelihood of drug interactions and adverse effects that can precipitate psychotic symptoms⁸. Common culprits include corticosteroids, anticholinergic drugs, and opioids, which are frequently used in hospital settings and have well-documented associations with psychosis⁸. Additionally, abrupt withdrawal from long-term use of certain medications, such as benzodiazepines, can trigger withdrawal-related psychosis, further complicating the clinical picture⁸. Addressing polypharmacy through careful medication management is thus a critical component of preventing psychosis in elderly inpatients⁹.

Chronic medical conditions also play a substantial role in increasing the risk of psychosis among elderly hospitalized patients⁹. Cardiovascular diseases, including heart failure and stroke, are common in the elderly and are strongly associated with the development of psychosis due to their impact on cerebral perfusion and the integrity of the blood-

-brain barrier⁹. Similarly, metabolic disorders such as diabetes and electrolyte imbalances can alter brain function, predisposing elderly patients to psychosis⁹. The presence of multiple comorbidities not only increases the risk of psychosis but also complicates its management, as treatment strategies must address both the underlying medical conditions and the psychiatric symptoms⁹.

Cognitive decline, particularly in the context of dementia, is another critical factor in the development of psychosis in elderly hospitalized patients⁹. Dementia-related psychosis is often more insidious, with a gradual onset of symptoms that may be exacerbated by hospitalization and the associated environmental stressors¹⁰. Alzheimer's disease, in particular, is associated with a higher prevalence of psychotic symptoms, including paranoid delusions and visual hallucinations¹⁰. The management of psychosis in these patients is particularly challenging, as antipsychotic medications carry significant risks, including increased mortality and cerebrovascular events¹⁰. Non-pharmacological interventions, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy and environmental modifications, are therefore increasingly being recommended as first-line treatments for psychosis in dementia patients¹¹.

Sensory impairments, such as vision and hearing loss, are prevalent in the elderly and significantly contribute to the risk of psychosis during hospitalization¹¹. These impairments can lead to misinterpretations of sensory input, resulting in hallucinations or delusions, particularly in the unfamiliar and often overstimulating hospital environment¹¹. For example, elderly patients with severe hearing loss may misinterpret conversations or background noise as threatening voices, while those with visual impairments may misperceive shadows or reflections as menacing figures¹¹. Addressing sensory impairments throu-

gh appropriate interventions, such as hearing aids and glasses, is a simple yet effective strategy to reduce the incidence of psychosis in hospitalized elderly patients¹².

Infections, particularly urinary tract infections (UTIs) and respiratory infections, are well-documented triggers of psychosis in the elderly¹². UTIs are especially common in elderly women and often present with atypical symptoms, including acute changes in mental status, which can be mistaken for primary psychiatric disorders¹². The systemic inflammatory response to infection can disrupt brain function, leading to the onset of psychosis or exacerbating pre-existing psychiatric conditions¹². Timely diagnosis and treatment of infections are therefore crucial in preventing psychosis and other neuropsychiatric complications in elderly hospitalized patients¹³.

Metabolic and electrolyte disturbances, common in hospitalized elderly patients, also contribute to the risk of psychosis¹³. Hyponatremia, for example, is a frequent complication in the elderly and is associated with confusion, disorientation, and hallucinations¹³. Similarly, hypercalcemia and hypoglycemia can precipitate psychotic episodes, particularly in patients with underlying neurocognitive disorders¹³. Monitoring and correcting these imbalances are essential components of preventing psychosis in elderly inpatients¹³.

OBJETIVES

The primary objective of this review was to analyze the risk factors contributing to the development of psychosis in hospitalized elderly patients, focusing on the roles of cognitive decline, polypharmacy, sensory impairments, and hospital-related stressors. The goal was to identify preventive measures and management strategies that could reduce the incidence and severity of psychosis in this population.

SECONDARY OBJETIVES

The secondary objective was to explore the pathophysiological mechanisms underlying psychosis in elderly patients, including neurotransmitter dysregulation and the impact of neurodegenerative diseases. This objective aimed to provide a foundation for developing targeted interventions to improve outcomes for elderly patients affected by psychosis during hospitalization.

METHODS

This is a narrative review, in which the main aspects of the risk factors contributing to the development of psychosis in hospitalized elderly patients, focusing on the roles of cognitive decline, polypharmacy, sensory impairments, and hospital-related stressors. The goal was to identify preventive measures and management strategies that could reduce the incidence and severity of psychosis in this population in recent years were analyzed. The beginning of the study was carried out with theoretical training using the following databases: PubMed, sciELO and Medline, using as descriptors: “Psychosis in elderly” OR “Hospitalization and mental health” OR “Polypharmacy in geriatric patients” OR “Cognitive decline and psychosis” OR “Preventive measures for hospital psychosis” in the last years. As it is a narrative review, this study does not have any risks.

Databases: This review included studies in the MEDLINE – PubMed (National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health), COCHRANE, EMBASE and Google Scholar databases.

The inclusion criteria applied in the analytical review were human intervention studies, experimental studies, cohort studies, case-control studies, cross-sectional studies and literature reviews, editorials, case reports, and poster presentations. Also, only studies writing in English and Portuguese were included.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The incidence of psychosis in elderly hospitalized patients has been studied extensively, with findings revealing significant variability depending on the patient population, hospital setting, and diagnostic criteria used¹⁴. Large-scale cohort studies estimate that up to 25-30% of elderly inpatients experience some form of psychotic episode during hospitalization¹⁵. However, this percentage rises considerably in specific subpopulations, particularly those in intensive care units (ICU) or those undergoing major surgeries, where rates can exceed 40%¹⁶. These variations highlight the influence of environmental and medical stressors on the onset of psychosis in vulnerable elderly patients¹⁷. Moreover, the lack of standardized criteria for diagnosing psychosis in this population contributes to discrepancies in reported incidence rates, as psychotic symptoms may be misinterpreted or underreported, particularly in the presence of cognitive impairment or delirium¹⁸.

A key aspect of psychosis in elderly patients is its strong association with cognitive decline and pre-existing neurodegenerative disorders such as dementia¹⁹. Patients with dementia, particularly those with Alzheimer’s disease or Lewy body dementia, demonstrate a markedly higher prevalence of psychosis during hospital admissions¹⁹. The neurodegenerative processes that characterize these conditions, including widespread cortical atrophy and synaptic dysfunction, disrupt normal cognitive and perceptual functions, leading to an increased susceptibility to psychosis²⁰. Furthermore, hospitalization itself often exacerbates these symptoms due to the disruption of routine, unfamiliar surroundings, and increased psychosocial stress²¹. The interplay between neurodegeneration and hospital-related stressors represents a critical area for further investigation, as it may inform the development of targeted interventions to reduce the incidence of psychosis in this population²².

Polypharmacy remains one of the most significant risk factors for the development of psychosis in elderly hospitalized patients²³. The elderly are frequently prescribed multiple medications to manage chronic conditions such as hypertension, diabetes, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease²³. However, the simultaneous use of drugs, particularly those with central nervous system activity, increases the likelihood of adverse drug reactions and psychotic symptoms²⁴. Medications commonly implicated in psychosis include corticosteroids, which can induce mood disturbances and hallucinations, anticholinergic drugs, known to cause confusion and delirium, and opioids, which may lead to opioid-induced psychosis²⁵. In many cases, the discontinuation of these drugs or careful adjustment of dosages can alleviate psychotic symptoms²⁶. However, managing polypharmacy in the elderly is often complicated by the necessity of these medications to control life-threatening conditions, making it essential to weigh the benefits and risks carefully²⁷.

In addition to polypharmacy, infections are a well-documented trigger for psychosis in elderly patients, with urinary tract infections (UTIs) being a particularly common culprit²⁸. UTIs, especially in elderly women, are often associated with atypical presentations, including acute onset of confusion, agitation, and psychotic symptoms²⁸. The systemic inflammation caused by infections such as UTIs, pneumonia, or sepsis can cross the blood-brain barrier and exacerbate neuroinflammation, a key factor in the pathophysiology of psychosis²⁹. Prompt identification and treatment of infections are critical in preventing the escalation of psychotic symptoms in hospitalized elderly patients³⁰. Moreover, the prevention of infections through early mobilization, adequate hydration, and maintaining hygiene standards plays an important role in reducing the overall incidence of psychosis in elderly hospital settings³¹.

Sleep disturbances have also been shown to significantly contribute to the onset of psychosis in elderly hospitalized patients³². Hospital environments, particularly intensive care units, are notorious for disrupting normal sleep patterns due to constant monitoring, noise, and medical interventions³². Sleep deprivation can lead to alterations in cognition, mood, and perception, which are particularly pronounced in elderly individuals due to age-related changes in circadian rhythms³³. In this context, sleep deprivation can precipitate psychotic episodes, characterized by hallucinations and delusions, which can severely complicate the patient's recovery³⁴. Interventions such as minimizing nighttime disturbances, promoting a quiet environment, and using non-pharmacological methods to improve sleep quality are essential for reducing the risk of psychosis in hospitalized elderly patients³⁵.

The role of sensory impairments, particularly vision and hearing loss, in the development of psychosis in elderly hospitalized patients cannot be understated³⁶. Sensory deficits are prevalent among the elderly and can lead to misinterpretation of environmental stimuli, increasing the likelihood of hallucinations and delusions³⁷. For example, visual hallucinations are more common in elderly patients with advanced visual impairment, as the brain may attempt to "fill in" the missing visual information with false perceptions³⁸. Similarly, auditory hallucinations may occur in patients with significant hearing loss due to misinterpretation of background noises or conversations³⁸. Addressing these sensory deficits through appropriate corrective measures, such as the use of hearing aids or glasses, can significantly reduce the incidence of psychotic symptoms in hospitalized elderly patients³⁹.

Neurotransmitter dysregulation is another key factor implicated in the development of psychosis in elderly patients, particularly in the context of hospital-induced stressors⁴⁰. Aging is associated with alterations in several neurotransmitter systems, including dopamine, serotonin, and acetylcholine, all of which play critical roles in regulating mood, cognition, and perception⁴⁰. Dopaminergic dysfunction, in particular, has long been associated with the pathophysiology of psychosis, with excess dopamine activity in certain brain regions leading to hallucinations and delusions⁴¹. Hospitalization, with its associated physical and emotional stressors, can further disrupt neurotransmitter balance, particularly in patients with pre-existing vulnerabilities, such as those with Parkinson's disease or dementia⁴². Understanding the role of neurotransmitter dysregulation in hospital-induced psychosis may inform pharmacological strategies aimed at stabilizing these systems and preventing the onset of psychotic symptoms⁴³.

The prolonged stay in intensive care units (ICUs) is particularly associated with an increased risk of psychosis in elderly patients⁴⁴. ICU psychosis, or delirium, is characterized by acute changes in mental status, including confusion, agitation, and hallucinations⁴⁵. The ICU environment, with its high levels of sensory stimulation, sleep deprivation, and physical immobilization, creates a perfect storm for the development of psychotic symptoms⁴⁵. The use of mechanical ventilation, sedation, and invasive monitoring further contributes to the disruption of normal cognitive function, increasing the risk of psychosis in critically ill elderly patients⁴⁶. Prevention strategies, including minimizing sedation, early mobilization, and promoting sleep hygiene, are essential for reducing the incidence of psychosis in ICU settings⁴⁷.

Psychosocial stressors, such as isolation from family and loss of autonomy, also play a significant role in the development of psychosis in hospitalized elderly patients⁴⁸. Hospitalization often represents a major life stressor for elderly individuals, who may already be dealing with physical frailty and cognitive decline⁴⁹. The sudden removal from familiar surroundings, combined with the loss of control over daily activities, can exacerbate feelings of anxiety and paranoia, leading to psychotic symptoms⁵⁰. Social isolation, particularly in the context of limited visitation policies in hospitals, further compounds these effects, as the lack of social interaction can contribute to feelings of delusion and hallucination⁵⁰. Addressing these psychosocial factors through family involvement, maintaining consistent communication, and providing psychological support are crucial elements in preventing psychosis in elderly patients during hospitalization⁵¹.

Despite the significant burden of psychosis in hospitalized elderly patients, there are several preventive measures that can be employed to reduce its incidence and improve patient outcomes⁵². Regular mental health assessments, particularly in ICU settings, can help detect early signs of psychosis and prevent its progression⁵³. Moreover, the use of non-pharmacological interventions, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and environmental modifications, has shown promise in reducing psychotic symptoms without the need for antipsychotic medications⁵³. These strategies, combined with careful management of polypharmacy and attention to sensory deficits, represent a multifaceted approach to reducing the incidence of psychosis in hospitalized elderly patients⁵⁴.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, psychosis in hospitalized elderly patients represents a complex and multifactorial condition, influenced by a range of physiological, psychological, and environmental factors. The high prevalence of this condition, particularly in critical care settings, underscores the need for increased vigilance and proactive management strategies. Cognitive decline, sensory impairments, polypharmacy, infections, and the hospital environment itself all contribute to the onset and exacerbation of psychotic symptoms in this vulnerable population. Addressing these factors through comprehensive care is essential for minimizing the occurrence and severity of psychosis during hospitalization.

The pathophysiology of psychosis in elderly patients is deeply rooted in age-related neurodegenerative processes, neurotransmitter imbalances, and the impact of comorbid medical conditions. The role of dopamine, serotonin, and acetylcholine dysregulation provides key insights into the biological underpinnings of psychosis in this demographic, guiding pharmacological interventions when necessary. However, the risks associated with antipsychotic medications, particularly in elderly patients, highlight the importance of weighing the benefits against the potential for adverse effects. Non-pharmacological approaches, including cognitive-behavioral therapy and environmental modifications, should be prioritized when appropriate.

Preventive strategies are paramount in reducing the incidence of psychosis in hospitalized elderly patients. These include early identification of high-risk individuals,

regular mental health assessments, careful management of polypharmacy, and addressing sensory impairments. The role of the hospital environment in contributing to psychosis cannot be overlooked, with disruptions in sleep, overstimulation, and social isolation playing pivotal roles in triggering or worsening symptoms. Implementing environmental modifications, promoting sleep hygiene, and ensuring consistent social support are critical components of a preventive care model.

Furthermore, the importance of multidisciplinary care in managing psychosis in elderly hospitalized patients cannot be overstated. Collaboration between medical, psychiatric, and nursing staff, alongside family involvement, is crucial for early detection, timely intervention, and ongoing management of psychotic symptoms. Tailoring treatment to the individual needs of the patient, particularly in the context of cognitive decline or comorbidities, enhances the efficacy of both pharmacological and non-pharmacological treatments.

In moving forward, future research should focus on refining diagnostic criteria for psychosis in elderly hospitalized patients, particularly in distinguishing between psychosis and delirium. Additionally, exploring the long-term outcomes of patients who experience psychosis during hospitalization, including the potential for recurrent episodes and the impact on overall prognosis, will be vital for developing more effective management and prevention strategies. This comprehensive approach is necessary to improve the quality of care and outcomes for elderly patients affected by psychosis in hospital settings.

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