

THE BIG PICTURE IN PARKINSON'S CARE

Why a Geriatrician May Be Your Missing Link

Written by: Michaela Lay



What is a Geriatrician

Most of our clients when they find us at Parkinson Association of Alberta are aware that neurologists are typically the specialists that treat Parkinson disease. However, many people in our community don't know about Geriatricians. Geriatricians are doctors who specialize in caring for older adults (typically over 65) and are experts in age related health issues and how your Parkinson diagnosis may affect other conditions you already live with or may develop as you age. Looking at the big picture of your health today and as you age. A geriatrician will look at your overall physical, mental, social and emotional functioning and come up with a plan to address not only Parkinson disease symptoms, but co-existing conditions, medication interactions, social supports and fall risks. This "whole person" approach to preventative care has the potential to greatly reduce ER visits and hospital admissions. A geriatrician is a great option if you are over 65, living with more than one condition or managing multiple medications that may have interactions. Geriatricians also play an important role in assessing frailty concerns before they become emergent.

Geriatricians work out of hospitals with in-patients and in the emergency departments, senior's clinics and geriatric assessment centres, this gives them the ability to consult with a multi-disciplinary team to support your overall health. In addition to publicly funded programs, Geriatricians in some of the bigger municipal centres work out of private centres where you can pay to access their services.

Geriatricians often play a key role in identifying subtle health changes that might otherwise be overlooked. For example, they can screen for mild cognitive impairment or depression—both of which are more common in Parkinson disease—and connect you or your loved one to mental health resources, physical therapists, or occupational therapists early on. Early intervention can help maintain independence, improve quality of life, and reduce emergency room visits. They can also discuss advance care planning in a supportive, client-focused way, ensuring that your wishes guide future health decisions.

Geriatrician vs Gerontologist

You may know someone who has seen a Gerontologist and wondered: Is Gerontology the same as Geriatrics?

Gerontology is the study of all facets of aging and Gerontologists are anyone who studies or works with the aging population – this could be Geriatricians, as well as geriatric nurses, specialized social workers, scientists, researchers, physical therapists or academics. All these professionals could potentially be a part of your allied health team in some capacity.

How to find a Geriatrician

Your general practitioner or nurse practitioner can make a referral to a geriatrician or a geriatric assessment clinic depending on your individual needs and health goals. If you do not have a family doctor, a walk-in clinic practitioner may be able to make the appropriate referral for you.

With only approximately 300 geriatricians practicing in Canada currently and only about 20 in Alberta, 1 or 2 in Saskatchewan and none currently practicing in the territories access can be difficult, however initiatives are popping up across the country to bridge the gap in care as our population ages. Some family doctors have Care of the Elderly (COE) specializations which affords them extra knowledge and consideration when caring for older adults, any physician or nurse practitioner can help you find a family doctor with a COE specialization. As our population ages geriatrician's will hopefully become a more popular, and readily available choice for care in our communities.

Final Thoughts

Parkinson's doesn't just affect movement it can touch every corner of health as we age. Add in other medical conditions or age-related concerns and it can become complicated to manage alone. That's where geriatricians shine. By weaving physical, cognitive, and emotional care into one plan, their "big-picture" approach works to keep people safer, stronger, and more connected. Because aging well means living fully, not just managing symptoms. If you have further questions about how a geriatrician may be able to help you or your loved one or how to access them, please do not hesitate to reach out to the client services team at Parkinson Association of Alberta to help guide you. ■