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Spot the Difference: Withdrawal Symptoms vs. Normal Aging in Elderly Clients

Withdrawal or Aging? A Clinician's Quick Guide

RED FLAGS AND SUBTLE SIGNS

- Symptoms like confusion, shakiness, or fatigue may be dismissed as aging or dementia.
- Polypharmacy and chronic illness can mask or mimic withdrawal signs.

COMMON WITHDRAWAL SIGNS TO MONITOR

Substances	Possible Withdrawal Signs in Elderly
Alcohol	Tremors, confusion, increased falls, elevated blood pressure, seizures
Benzodiazepines	Anxiety, irritability, sleep disruption, hallucinations
Opioids	Sweating, joint pain, agitation, nausea, GI upset
Stimulants	Fatigue, depressive episodes, appetite changes, low motivation
Nicotine	Irritability, restlessness, increased cravings

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Many elders may underreport substance use due to stigma or shame.
- Look for worsening symptoms during hospitalization or abrupt medication changes.

QUICK TIPS FOR CLINICIANS

- Monitor closely during transitions (hospital discharge, assisted living).
- Ask family members about baseline behavior vs. new symptoms.
- Use age-sensitive screening tools (e.g., SASSI-A2, AUDIT-C with geriatric norms).



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This reference helps clinicians distinguish substance withdrawal from age-related concerns. Includes signs to watch for, common substance effects in elders, and guidance for supportive, nonjudgmental screening.