Understanding Frailty

What is frailty?
Frailty is a life stage. It begins when the health issues a person experiences over their lifetime start to have an effect on their overall health or their independence with doing everyday activities. Frailty may be observed as changes with memory/thinking, difficulties getting around, or increased medical problems.

The reasons for the changes, and the time at which these changes begin, varies between people.

Picture a jar of marbles.

• The empty space in the jar represents your ability to bounce back and recover from illness.
• The marbles represent the health and/or social stressors that you may encounter over your life span.
• Each health or social stressor you experience is like adding a marble to the jar.
• The more marbles in your jar, the lower your ability to bounce back and recover from illness.
• The jar filling with marbles is how we become more frail and we may start to see a growing effect on our day-to-day life.

Frailty and age

Frailty is not the same as age. We can be frail at any age. Although more common in older adults, people may experience many health issues and/or stressors at an earlier time in their lives and become frail at a younger age.

Frailty helps to explain why we see differences in people of the same age. For example, you could have an 80 year-old person who is an active runner, eats well and is connected to social supports. Another person of the same age may be living with chronic health issues, inactivity, and a lack of social supports. The care these two people require may also look different. One may remain at home with help from family and the other may require home care or need to live in an assisted living home.
Frailty looks different for everyone.

You cannot always tell if a person is frail just by looking at them. Frailty is complex and not the same for everyone.

Frailty progresses over time as we experience health issues or stressors. Being frail makes us more at risk for experiencing illness or injury and affects our ability to cope with physical and emotional stress. Therefore, it is important for health care providers to look at how a person is doing overall with day-to-day living rather than look at one health issue at a time. Assessing frailty involves looking at the overall picture of how a person is managing.

Supporting persons experiencing frailty

Although there is no treatment available that works for everyone’s frailty, current research is looking at ways to reverse the underlying contributors, and improve how people experience frailty. The Nova Scotia Health Authority (Halifax area, Eastern Shore and West Hants) is focused on addressing frailty in the population and on helping to educate the public about it.
Why is it important for me and my family to know about frailty?

Understanding your overall health and level of frailty, and how it can affect your current and future health, will help you be able to:

› be more in control of your health and how you’re feeling;

› be more informed, along with your health care providers, about what to expect in the future;

› talk about strategies and treatments with your health care providers that can contribute to bettering your health; and

› plan appropriate care and choose treatments that will help you feel your best.

Knowing your frailty level will help you and your health care providers know more about how you may respond to any medical care and illnesses you may be experiencing now and as you age.
With frailty, you may have:
› more complications and side effects from treatments;
› a slower recovery after common treatments; and/or
› only a partial recovery after common treatments.

For example, the more frail a person is when they have surgery to repair a broken hip, the more likely they will have a longer hospital stay and more health issues beyond the hip (e.g. delirium, infections, difficulty with drug side effects).

A person who is frail is also more likely to have a partial recovery, so that life going forward looks a little different after the surgery in terms of memory, mobility, and care needs.

It is important to ask your health care provider about frailty and how you can be supported.
Why is it important that my health care providers know about frailty?

Your health care provider(s) needs to understand your level of frailty, and talk about this with you and your family. This understanding will help them to focus more on:

› how well you were doing with daily activities before you came to see them;
› any possible early warning signs for other health issues;
› treatments or strategies that target your particular care needs and improve quality of life;
› your strengths and abilities, and what you may need to help you continue to strengthen them;
› expectations for future health; and
› whether an assessment with a frailty specialist, such as a geriatrician, is necessary.

When you and your health care providers share an understanding of your frailty level, your care will better meet your particular needs.
Identifying frailty is a key part of the practice of care within all areas of health care.

**What does identifying frailty involve?**

To identify frailty, your health care team may ask you and your caregiver questions about your overall health, memory, activities at home, and how you are managing. For example, you or your caregiver may be asked about how you are doing with your walking or with being able to do your day-to-day activities, such as making meals, housekeeping, or grooming. You may also be asked how you are doing with your memory and thinking, and with participating in any social activities you are involved with. The answers to these questions will help you to more fully understand if or how frailty is impacting your life now.

As frailty changes over time, your health care providers may re-check your frailty level by asking more questions of you or your family to better understand what is happening with you now so that they can provide you with the best possible care.

**Questions? Concerns?**

Ask your health care provider about frailty.
Frailty is an important issue across Canada. In 2015, people from many different areas of health care, along with patients and caregivers, came together to develop a strategy to address frailty within The Nova Scotia Health Authority (Halifax area, Eastern Shore and West Hants). The Frailty Strategy aims to support persons experiencing frailty that begins with identifying and understanding frailty. This will help ensure an approach to care that considers frailty and meets individual needs across all health care areas.

Find out more about the Frailty Strategy or request a copy of the strategy document by contacting frailtystrategy@nshealth.ca.
Looking for more health information?
Find this pamphlet and all our patient resources here: http://library.nshealth.ca/PatientGuides
Contact your local public library for books, videos, magazines, and other resources.
For more information, go to http://library.novascotia.ca
Connect with a registered nurse in Nova Scotia any time: call 811 or visit https://811.novascotia.ca
Learn about other programs and services in your community: call 211 or visit http://ns.211.ca

Nova Scotia Health Authority promotes a smoke-free, vape-free, and scent-free environment.
Please do not use perfumed products. Thank you!
www.nshealth.ca

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