

Healthy Aging Series

I recently completed the Professional in Age-Friendly Health Care certification course through the Institute for Healthcare Improvement. Part of that course was reviewing the changes that occur with aging. I wanted to share some short segments with all of you.

Source: Institute for Healthcare Improvement CPAFH review course Chapter 3, lesson 12

Peripheral Nervous System: Aging and Its Impact

“The **peripheral nervous system (PNS)** connects the brain and spinal cord to the rest of the body, carrying signals that control movement, sensation, and reflexes. As the PNS ages, important protective functions — like sensing pain, detecting body position, and responding to the environment — begin to weaken. These changes increase vulnerability to **injury, imbalance, and neuropathy**, all of which affect independence and safety.”

Key Changes

1. **Pain perception decreases** which means that injuries may go unnoticed.
2. **Decreased Sense of Smell** which can effect taste and the enjoyment of food as well as reduced capacity to smell dangers such as smoke or rotten food.
3. **Increased Risk for Peripheral Neuropathy** which increases the risk of infection and effects mobility.
4. **Decreased Proprioception** – which can increase the risk of falls and effect balance.

“When older adults lose sensitivity in the **Peripheral Nervous System (PNS)**, they lose important **warning signals** that keep them safe. Missed pain cues, reduced smell, or balance problems may lead to **falls, burns, injuries, or delayed medical care**. Recognizing these changes allows health care providers to implement safety measures and adapt care approaches.”

Ways SASH staff can help participants adjust to these changes:

- Encourage regular foot checks with a mirror.
- Ensure that smoke detectors are functional
- Increase lighting
- Encourage exercise such as Tai Chi
- Label food with a date