

Frailty and a Palliative Approach to Care

Healthcare providers may use the term “frail” or “frailty” to describe a patient’s condition. Our familiarity with using the term should not be mistaken for accuracy of what is being described. Why? There is no one, agreed-upon definition of frailty.²

Age ≠ Frailty

Frailty may be associated with aging, but it is considered different from the natural aging process. Frailty most commonly occurs in the older adult population; however, it also happens in younger age-groups.²

Disability ≠ Frailty

While disability may coincide with frailty, it differs in its cause. Frailty is believed to occur because of cumulative declines across multiple physiologic systems, decreasing a person’s reserves and increasing their vulnerability to stressors.¹

Frailty is:

- A dynamic, progressive process of functional decline, often over many years¹⁻⁴. Decline is more common than regaining function, especially in later stages^{1,2}
- Characterized by symptoms such as: decreased reserve and resistance to stressors, slowed gait, weakness, unintentional weight loss and/or loss of muscle mass, fatigue, low mood¹⁻⁴
- A life-limiting diagnosis, appropriate for the implementation of a palliative approach to care²⁻⁴
- Difficult to assess and diagnose, especially if clinicians are using non-comparable tools or are not using tools that are validated to identify frailty²

Some Frailty Screening and Assessment Tools identify frailty by comprehensive assessment, whereas others identify decline based on performance of activities:

- [Clinical Frailty Scale](#) (Dalhousie University)
 - [Guidance for Use](#), including aids for novice users
- [The Frailty Index](#) (Dalhousie University)

Learn More about Frailty:

Broadening our understanding of frailty, helps us to identify and support patients living with frailty and their families.

[Canadian Frailty Network - Frailty: Assessment, Mitigation & Prevention Module](#)
(CME credits available)

Resources:

1. Fried, L., Tangen, C., Walston, J., Newman, A., Hirsch, C., Gottdiener, J., Seeman, T., Tracy, R., Kop, W., Burke, G., McBurnie, M. (2001). [Frailty in Older Adults: Evidence for a Phenotype](#), *Journal of Gerontology*, 56A(3).
2. Pal, L., Manning, L. (2014). [Palliative Care for frail older people](#). *Clinical Medicine*, 14(3).
3. [Pallium Pocketbook](#).
4. [Waterloo Wellington Early Identification and Prognostic Indicator Guide](#).

