

As cases mount, doctors focus on high-risk seniors

Graphic: Dipankar Chanda

Weak Immune System Makes Elderly Vulnerable

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Kolkata: The 66-year-old Nayabad resident, who tested Covid-19 positive six days back, died in Peerless Hospital on Wednesday evening. Five out of the six Covid-19 patients who died so far in the city were aged either above or close to 60. Currently, at least five other elderly patients are on ventilation and fighting for life, including a 77-year-old. With the number of elderly people getting infected rising fast, doctors feel there would be a spike in the need for intensive care units. It would be a massive challenge to take proper care of elderly patients, they fear.

"Let us not be surprised if the number of the elderly population infected by this virus multiplies soon. And because most of them have co-morbid conditions, many of them will need intensive care. It is going to be a huge challenge for healthcare workers," said J B Saha, community medicine specialist and former principal of ID Hospital.

The elderly population is at a higher risk of coronavirus infection because of their low immunity level and associated co-morbid conditions like diabetes, hypertension, chronic kidney ailment, chronic pulmonary obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and compromised lung. A few of these patients now on ventilation had come to the hospital with problems of pneumonia. But with healthcare providers already alert with the rapid spread of the virus and are getting each pneumonia or acute respiratory syndrome case tested, later tested positive.

"Pneumonia is already bad for aged patients in terms of morbidity and mortality. When an elderly person is infected with this virus, the risk factor will increase, with many requiring ventilation support. And keeping them on prolonged ventilation has its own harms as chances of other infections will shoot up. So, it is going to be a tightrope walk," said Sugata Dasgupta, critical care specialist at RG Kar Medical College and Hospital.

Doctors said that management of severe cases of Covid-19 is not different from that of managing patients with viral pneumonia that can induce respiratory failure. "The treatment regime for the elderly is the same as that of the adult. But due to lower immunity and pre-existing conditions, treating these elderly patients becomes trickier, though all might not need ventilation support. We need to put that extra effort as some of them

PROBLEMS INCREASE WITH AGE

> The first Covid-19 death in the state was a man close to 60 and with hosts of co-morbid conditions



> Five out of the six Covid-19 patients who died so far in the city were aged either above or close to 60

> Five other elderly patients are fighting for life on ventilation



WHY ARE THE ELDERLY MORE AT RISK?

> Older people don't have a strong immune system, so they are more vulnerable to infectious disease

> They're also more likely to have conditions such as heart disease, lung disease, diabetes or kidney disease, which weaken their body's ability to fight infectious disease



ALTERNATIVE TREATMENT PROTOCOL USED ON ONE ELDERLY PATIENT IN KOLKATA

> A 66-year-old former Coal India employee and a Nayabad resident, who died on Wednesday, was put on anti-retroviral drugs used in the treatment for HIV. This is the first time that this drug was used on

a Covid-19 patient in the state. "He was on ventilation. A dialysis was done but the condition remained very critical throughout," a source said

> Doctors at Sawai Man Singh Hospital in Jaipur were the first to start using a combination of Lopinavir and Ritonavir on some Covid-19 patients, including an Italian

> A govt hospital in Kochi, too, declared a British national free of the virus after the patient was put on the anti-HIV drug



SAFETY TIPS FOR ELDERLY

> Practise social distancing, don't receive any visitors unless absolutely necessary



> If you have to see others, make sure it's only healthy people

> Don't leave home unless absolutely necessary, have neighbours shop for your groceries and refill any medications



> If you have to go out, avoid large groups, don't shake hands or hug, keep a distance from people and avoid touching your face



> Wash hands regularly



The elderly are more vulnerable due to their co-morbid conditions and lower immunity. They need to be more cautious than the rest since their immunity may not be able to ward off a viral attack. It could aggravate the other illnesses and affect their organs

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might develop multi-organ failure," said Susruta Bandyopadhyay, critical care specialist at AMRI Hospital Salt Lake.

According to health experts, septic shock and organ dysfunction like acute kidney problems are some of the threats the elderly patients face. "Because of lower immunity, the virus load can be higher in elderly patients, especially in those

with co-morbid conditions. In addition to affecting other organs, the infection could also make the heart unstable. This category of patients might need other supportive care in addition to treating the symptoms of the virus," explained cardiologist Rabin Chakraborty, chairperson of the health committee at the Bengal Chamber.

