FAST FACTS: Differentiating Abdominal Pain: Pancreatitis, Cholecystitis, Appendicitis, and Gastroenteritis

Common Name: Belly Ache

The source of abdominal pain can be very difficult to identify in the older adult. As compared to adults under 50, abdominal pain in the older adult is much more likely to be related to serious medical conditions. Constipation and urinary tract infection (UTI) are the most common sources of abdominal discomfort in older adult patients. However, older adults should also be screened for pancreatitis, cholecystitis, appendicitis, and gastroenteritis. Due to the vague nature of symptoms that often present with abdominal pain, misdiagnosis is common – potentially resulting in death. Nurses should also note that these conditions often cause a fever; however, it is not uncommon for older adults to present with a normal temperature. (Also see “Abdominal Pain Management Guide”; See “Chest Pain Management Guide” for information on GERD)

- **Pancreatitis – Inflammation of the Pancreas**
  - Upper abdominal pain/tenderness may radiate to back
  - Pain increases after eating (indigestion)
  - Nausea/Vomiting
  - Weight loss
  - Oily smelly stools

- **Cholecystitis – Inflammation of Gallbladder**
  - Upper right abdominal pain/tenderness may radiate to right shoulder or back
  - Bloating
  - Fever
  - Chills
  - Nausea/Vomiting

- **Appendicitis – Inflammation of the Appendix**
  - Lower right abdominal pain/tenderness that increases with time and may worsen with movement or coughing
  - Nausea/Vomiting and loss of appetite
  - Abdominal swelling
  - Constipation/inability to pass gas

- **Gastroenteritis – Intestinal Infection also known as “Stomach flu”**
  - Watery loose stools
  - General abdominal pain/cramping
  - Nausea/Vomiting

Abdominal pain complaints should be investigated immediately as treatment delays are the most common causes of death. Pain management for these conditions focuses on treatment of the underlying causes. Opioid analgesics also help to reduce the severe pain that is associated with these conditions.

References