

The course of cognitive decline in older persons: results from the longitudinal aging study Amsterdam

Comijs HC, Dik MG, Deeg DJH, Jonker C

Dept of Psychiatry, Institute for Research in Extramural Medicine (EMGO Institute), VU University Medical Center, Amsterdam

Background: The course of cognitive functioning in older persons is studied over a period of six years. The first aim was to distinguish cognitive decline as a temporary state from progressive cognitive decline. The second aim was to identify predictors which may be useful in discriminating persons with temporary cognitive decline from persons with progressive cognitive decline at an early stage.

Methods: Data were derived from the longitudinal aging study Amsterdam (LASA), a population-based study among older persons in the Netherlands. A cohort of 1313 persons was followed at three successive observations during six years. Cognitive decline was defined as a difference score of more than one standard deviation on the MMSE (≥ 3 points) between two measurements over a period of three years. Predictor variables were socio-demographics, memory complaints, Apolipoprotein E $\epsilon 4$, diabetes mellitus, cardiovascular diseases, self rated health, depressive symptoms and current use of benzodiazepines.

Results: 18.2% of the sample showed cognitive decline over a period of three years. In the next three years, almost half of the persons of this group recovered from cognitive decline or stayed stable, while 7.5% further declined and 44% were lost to follow-up. Especially older age, memory complaints and an increase of cardiovascular diseases at follow-up predict further deterioration.

Conclusion: Many older persons show temporary cognitive decline. In order to discriminate persons with progressing cognitive decline from persons with temporary cognitive decline in an early stage, clinical information, such as the presence of memory complaints, age of 75 years and older, lower MMSE scores and an increase of cardiovascular diseases may be helpful to clinicians.

Hannie Comijs, LASA/EMGO, VU University Medical Center, Van der Boechorststraat 7, 1081 BT Amsterdam, t +31 20 4446770, e-mail h.comijs@vumc.nl

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