

THE PREVALENCE OF PHYSIOLOGICAL CHANGES AND GASTROINTESTINAL
DISORDERS AMONG THE ELDERLY GERIATRIC POPULATION IN TRINIDAD:
CAREGIVERS' ROLE IN FOOD SAFETY

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Background: Physiological changes during the ageing process are inevitable. These changes are marked by the increased risk of contracting gastrointestinal (GI) disorders, especially when proper food handling and hygiene practices are compromised.

Objectives: The objectives of this study were to (1) determine the prevalence of gastrointestinal disorders among the elderly (2) to identify the prevalence of common physiological changes that occur among the elderly (3) to examine the relationship between gender and gastrointestinal disorders in the elderly (4) and to evaluate the food handling practices of caregivers within the Geriatric Homes in Trinidad.

Design: A total of ninety six elderly subjects residing in Geriatric Homes in east, north, central and south Trinidad were studied. The study design was cross-sectional, and data was collected using questionnaires. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: section one, which was based on the physiological changes and gastrointestinal health of individuals; and section two, which was based on food preparation practices.

Results: Results show that the most prevalent physiological changes occurring among the elderly were decreased physical activity (75%), decreased muscle strength (72.9%), reduced food consumption (62.5%), and memory loss (54.2%). The most common gastrointestinal symptoms experienced were tiredness (44.8%), constipation (43.8%), upset stomach (31.3%), and abdominal pain (31.3%). Gender was not an influential factor for the onset of gastrointestinal disorders ($p>0.05$). Caregivers comply 100% with the cleaning and separating preparation practices; while 49.43% defrost foods on the counter top; 55.17% reheat foods until it feels hot; and 100% wash their hands throughout food preparation and during personal hygiene practices. Findings from this

study confirm the occurrence of aging physiological changes and an increased onset of gastrointestinal symptoms among the elderly.

Conclusion: Emerging from this study was the crucial role of the caregiver in elderly care and their immediate responsibility in ensuring that proper food handling practices are in compliance with the recommended standards.