



Enhancing Older Adult Care in the ED: The Impact of a Geriatric Comfort Cart

By Kayla P. Carpenter and Fernanda Bellolio, MD, MS on behalf of the SAEM Academy of Geriatric Emergency Medicine

A hectic and unfamiliar environment, the uncertainty surrounding one's health, the windowless confines of patient's room that can extend for hours, the constant flow of physicians, nurses, and staff... Countless sources of stress confront all patients in the emergency department (ED). For older adults in particular, these ED conditions and accompanying feelings of discomfort can often exacerbate comorbidities and symptoms including visual and auditory impairments, cognitive decline due to delirium and dementia, and compromised communication.

Geriatric patients account for 45% of ED visits, underscoring the imperative

to address the unique needs of this population to enhance emergency care. Improving the comfort of older adults in the ED, however, can be difficult due to the fast-paced nature of emergency medicine (EM).

One intervention that can improve the geriatric patient experience is a comfort cart designed for older adults. In [one study](#) a comfort cart led to improved comfort levels and communication for older adults. Of the surveyed respondents, 98.0% affirmed the cart's positive impact on their comfort, while 95.1% reported an improved overall experience during their ED stay, highlighting the cart's

potential advantages in reducing stress and anxiety associated with emergency health care settings.

The cart also demonstrated its efficacy in promoting independence, with 67.5% of patients expressing a stronger sense of self-reliance. Clinicians similarly recognized the value of the geriatric comfort cart, with 97.0% acknowledging its positive impact on patient comfort, which, in turn, contributed to improved patient satisfaction.

The cart facilitated a more compassionate care delivery approach, with 87.0% of providers reporting an increased capacity for empathetic and



patient-centered care. Importantly, **83% of clinicians observed that the comfort cart improved patient orientation** — a pivotal factor in delirium prevention and boosting patient engagement in their care.

The cart comprises various non-pharmacological therapies designed to increase comfort, improve communication, and reduce stress and boredom for older patients in the ED. The components of the cart include communication-enhancing tools such as hearing amplifiers, headphones, magnifying glasses, pens, notepads, reading glasses, and chargers. To bolster comfort, the cart stocks hats, mittens, blankets, and aromatherapy options featuring scents such as lavender, lemon, and eucalyptus to help mitigate stress and nausea. Distraction tools like snacks, magazines, word puzzles, playing cards, and coloring books are also available. Personal care items including toothbrushes, toothpaste, sleep masks, combs, hand lotion, and deodorant cater to the specific needs of older adults.

Along with increasing comfort, facilitating communication, and reducing stress, these interventions help older adults feel seen, acknowledged, and

cared for as individuals and patients. By improving comfort and orientation, they may also play a role in deferring, if not preventing, delirium in geriatric patients. In addition to improving the comfort and ED experience for older adults, the cart is low cost and causes minimal disruptions for ED staff. It requires no structural changes to the ED environment, enabling providers to implement the cart and confer benefits to patients in mere minutes.

Simple interventions such as hearing amplifiers, magazines, and coloring books may seem insignificant, but can prove pivotal in the unfamiliar environment of the ED by meeting the unique needs of older adult patients and fostering a culture of patient-centeredness and compassion among health care providers, thereby elevating the overall quality of care.

The geriatric comfort cart is an affordable and feasible intervention that addresses the unique needs of older adults in the ED. As health care systems strive to create age-friendly environments and improve patient-centered care, initiatives like the comfort cart offer a promising avenue to enhance the well-being and experience of older adults during their time of need. ▶

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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