

Policy Brief

May 2023

DON'T FORGET: INCLUDING BRIEF COGNITIVE ASSESSMENTS AT THE ANNUAL WELLNESS VISIT

Executive Summary

The Medicare Annual Wellness Visit (AWV) offers a unique opportunity for patients to develop a personalized prevention plan with their healthcare team. While cognitive assessments are provided during the AWV, less than one-third of beneficiaries' report having one. Failing to administer cognitive assessments during the AWV is a missed opportunity since AWV's implementation in 2011. Including brief cognitive assessments during AWVs has the potential to cut federal spending on cognitive impairment, reverse impairment symptoms, and encourage conversations about brain health practices.

Keywords: Annual wellness visit, Cognitive impairment, Early diagnosis, Medicare

INTRODUCTION

Roughly two out of three older Americans will experience cognitive impairment.¹ These numbers will grow as more Americans live into older adulthood.²

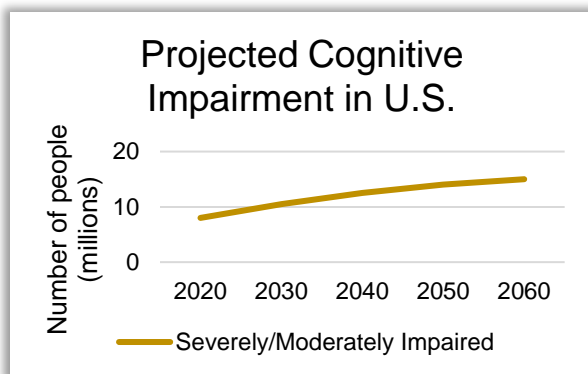


Figure 1. Hale et al., 2020

The structure is already in place to screen millions of Americans for cognitive impairment through Medicare's Annual Wellness Visit (AWV),³ yet cognitive assessments are currently underutilized.⁴ Half of US adults want at least a baseline cognitive evaluation and almost all physicians view cognitive assessments as beneficial.⁵

Half of US adults indicate wanting at least a baseline cognitive evaluation.⁵



Nearly all physicians think cognitive assessments are beneficial.⁵



Medicare: Part B covers cognitive screening as a service during the Annual Wellness Visit (AWV).⁶ Sixty million Americans qualified for AWV in 2022 but only one-half of beneficiaries attended their AWV and less than one-third reported having a cognitive assessment.⁴

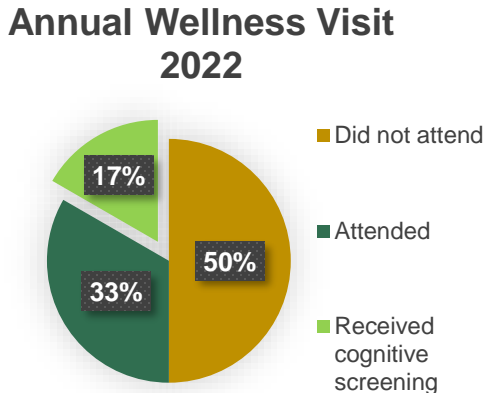


Figure 2. Jacobson et al., 2020

COMPELLING RESEARCH

Brief cognitive assessments are associated with benefits for people, their families, health care professionals, and the federal government.

Reverse symptoms.

Brief cognitive assessments can identify reversible causes of cognitive impairment. Some examples include vitamin B12 deficiency, medication interactions, and depression.⁷

Opportunity for brain health conversations.

Delirium and dementia are common causes of cognitive impairment⁸ and 40% of cases are entirely preventable.^{9,10} Administering brief cognitive assessment creates an opportunity for patient education on prevention of future cognitive impairment.

Saves money and time.

It is estimated that \$7 trillion could be saved if individuals are diagnosed with dementia early.¹¹ Brief cognitive assessments are shorter than comprehensive cognitive assessments and still detect aspects of cognitive functioning that require more evaluation.¹²

Proper referral by Medicare.

Early detection can lead to prompt referral to further neurological evaluation and

intervention.¹³ There is substantial guidance for providers to refer patients if impairment is suspected at the AWV.¹⁴

Allows for baseline evaluation.

Absence of a baseline cognitive evaluation makes it difficult for physicians to properly identify cognitive impairment and leads to costly misdiagnoses.⁷ Brief cognitive assessment allows for a baseline evaluation and more accurate diagnosis in the future.¹⁴

Gives individuals time to plan.

If irreversible impairment is suspected early through brief cognitive assessments (i.e., dementia), this allows individuals to be a part of their future by making their wishes known.

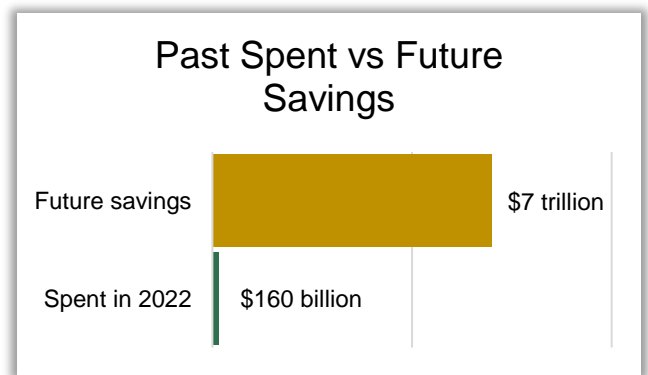


Figure 3. ACL Administration; Alz Facts & Figures 2022

POLICY CONTEXT

Medicare, Title XVIII of the Social Security Act, is administered through the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) under the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). Legislative oversight of Medicare is through the House Energy & Commerce Committee and the Senate Finance Committee. With the passing of the Affordable Care Act in 2010, sections of Medicare Part B were amended to cover an Annual Wellness Visit.

According to the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), providers are "required to check for cognitive impairment as part of the AWV,"¹⁴ however research suggests cognitive assessments are not being conducted.⁴

A growing number of leading organizations support cognitive assessments during the AWW. Groups like the [American Academy of Family Physicians](#), [Alzheimer's Association](#), and [Gerontological Society of America](#) have created toolkits to help healthcare providers administer brief cognitive assessments. The Alzheimer's Association's toolkit is specifically targeted toward brief cognitive assessments during the AWW to illustrate easy adoption into clinical practice.

POLICY RECOMMENDATION

- ✓ Require brief cognitive assessments in the Annual Wellness Visit under Medicare: Part B

Administering brief cognitive assessments at the AWW can be easily implemented by practitioners with the widespread availability of screening tools.

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