



AGE-RELATED CHANGES IN THE NERVOUS SYSTEM AND THEIR IMPACT ON QUALITY OF LIFE IN OLDER ADULTS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Susanna Halim^{1*}, Trya Fitri Ayuni²

Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Science, University of Prima Indonesia¹

Student of Magister Dentistry Science, University of Prima Indonesia²

e-mail: susannahalim@unprimdn.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Aging is an inevitable biological process characterized by progressive structural and functional alterations in the central and peripheral nervous systems. These neurobiological changes directly compromise sensory perception, motor coordination, gait stability, and cognitive functions, thereby undermining functional independence and elevating the risk of falls among older adults. Understanding these intricate interactions is paramount for developing comprehensive geriatric interventions. This literature review aimed to synthesize current evidence on age-related changes in the nervous system and determine their specific impacts on functional capacity and quality of life in older populations. A structured literature search was conducted across four electronic databases *PubMed*, *Scopus*, *ScienceDirect*, and *Google Scholar*—for peer-reviewed articles published between 2020 and 2025. The screening adhered to predefined eligibility criteria focusing on observational studies, neuropathological examinations, and conceptual syntheses examining structural or functional neurological decline in older adults. Out of 1,240 retrieved records, 13 core publications meeting all inclusion criteria were synthesized narratively. The synthesized literature confirms that structural alterations, including cerebral volume reduction, synaptic density depletion, neuroinflammation, and peripheral demyelination, correlate with diminished processing speed, working memory decline, and impaired sensorimotor integration. Gait and balance abnormalities serve as early functional markers of central neurodegenerative changes and independent predictors of falls. Furthermore, physical frailty and loss of autonomous mobility severely deteriorate perceived quality of life across physical, psychological, and social domains. Neurological aging represents a multifaceted continuum where cellular and macroscopic structural deficits translate into measurable functional impairments. Mitigating these adverse impacts requires integrated geriatric care models that incorporate routine cognitive-sensorimotor screening, structured physical conditioning, and social support frameworks to foster healthy and resilient aging.

Keywords: *aging, nervous system, older adults, quality of life, cognitive function*

ABSTRAK

Penuaan merupakan proses biologis yang tak terelakkan, yang ditandai dengan perubahan struktural dan fungsional secara progresif pada sistem saraf pusat dan perifer. Perubahan neurobiologis ini secara langsung memengaruhi persepsi sensorik, koordinasi motorik, stabilitas gaya berjalan, dan fungsi kognitif, sehingga mengurangi kemandirian fungsional serta meningkatkan risiko jatuh pada lansia. Memahami interaksi yang kompleks ini sangatlah penting untuk mengembangkan intervensi geriatri yang komprehensif. Tinjauan pustaka ini bertujuan untuk menyintesis bukti terkini mengenai perubahan sistem saraf akibat penuaan serta menentukan dampaknya secara spesifik terhadap kapasitas fungsional dan kualitas hidup.

populasi lansia. Pencarian pustaka secara terstruktur dilakukan pada empat basis data elektronik PubMed, Scopus, ScienceDirect, dan Google Scholar—untuk menemukan artikel yang telah melalui telaah sejawat (peer-reviewed) dan diterbitkan antara tahun 2020 hingga 2025. Proses penyaringan mengikuti kriteria kelayakan yang telah ditetapkan sebelumnya, dengan fokus pada studi observasional, pemeriksaan neuropatologis, dan sintesis konseptual yang mengkaji penurunan neurologis baik secara struktural maupun fungsional pada lansia. Dari 1.240 catatan yang ditemukan, 13 publikasi utama yang memenuhi seluruh kriteria inklusi disintesis secara naratif. Literatur yang disintesis mengonfirmasi bahwa perubahan struktural—termasuk pengurangan volume serebral, penurunan kepadatan sinaptik, neuroinflamasi, dan demielinasi perifer—berkorelasi dengan melambatnya kecepatan pemrosesan informasi, penurunan memori kerja, serta gangguan integrasi sensorimotor. Abnormalitas gaya berjalan dan keseimbangan merupakan penanda fungsional awal dari perubahan neurodegeneratif sentral sekaligus prediktor independen risiko jatuh. Selain itu, kelemahan fisik (frailty) dan hilangnya mobilitas mandiri secara signifikan menurunkan kualitas hidup yang dirasakan, baik dalam aspek fisik, psikologis, maupun sosial. Penuaan neurologis merupakan suatu kontinum multidimensi di mana defisit struktural, baik pada tingkat seluler maupun makroskopis, bermanifestasi menjadi gangguan fungsional yang dapat diukur. Upaya memitigasi dampak buruk tersebut memerlukan model perawatan geriatri terintegrasi yang mencakup skrining kognitif-sensorimotor secara rutin, latihan fisik terstruktur, dan kerangka dukungan sosial guna mendorong proses penuaan yang sehat dan tangguh.

Kata kunci: *penuaan, sistem saraf, lansia, kualitas hidup, fungsi kognitif*

INTRODUCTION

Aging represents an inevitable biological phenomenon characterized by a progressive decline in physiological functional reserve across multiple organ systems, with the nervous system exhibiting pronounced vulnerability. The nervous system acts as the central regulator of homeostatic adaptation, sensory perception, voluntary motor coordination, and higher-order cognitive processing (Adler, 2024; Piper, 2020). With advancing age, both the central and peripheral nervous architectures undergo complex structural, biochemical, and electrophysiological modifications (Gonzales et al., 2022; Guidolin et al., 2023; Jiang et al., 2025). These changes significantly reduce the physiological threshold required to adapt efficiently to dynamic environmental stressors and daily task demands (Rice et al., 2021). Consequently, understanding the intrinsic trajectory of neural aging is imperative to distinguish expected physiological senescent shifts from early pathological neurodegeneration (Abrous et al., 2026; Allen et al., 2022; Gonzales et al., 2022).

At the macroscopic and microscopic levels, central nervous system aging is characterized by widespread brain tissue atrophy, localized volume loss within the prefrontal cortex and hippocampus, and substantial reductions in dendritic spine density (Bourdillon et al., 2020; Piper, 2020). Concurrently, metabolic cellular stress, compromised mitochondrial dynamics, and the chronic accumulation of neuroinflammatory mediators disrupt synaptic plasticity and impair long-term potentiation (Gipson et al., 2021; Irollo et al., 2021; Namba et al., 2021). These neurobiological disturbances slow down central information processing speeds, diminish executive functioning reserves, and constrain working memory capacity. In the peripheral nervous system, segmental demyelination, progressive axonal degeneration, and loss of sensory mechanoreceptors severely disrupt sensorimotor feedback pathways.

The functional translation of these combined central and peripheral neurological alterations is prominently manifested in altered mobility, balance dysfunctions, and impaired gait dynamics (Sides et al., 2023). Degraded proprioceptive inputs and slowed nerve conduction velocity impede rapid compensatory postural adjustments during unexpected perturbations (Adler, 2024). Clinical assessments have demonstrated that subclinical cognitive decline is strongly correlated with gait variability, transforming walking into an attention-demanding task for aging individuals (Harrison et al., 2025; Mukli et al., 2022; Salecha et al., 2025; Yano et al., 2024). This sensorimotor-cognitive dissociation substantially increases the incidence of unintentional falls, institutionalizations, and secondary physical trauma (Li et al., 2024). As a result, older individuals often develop a pervasive fear of falling, which leads to self-imposed mobility restrictions and a subsequent spiral into physical deconditioning.

Despite extensive research exploring isolated aspects of neuroanatomy or geriatric sociology, a notable research gap remains regarding how micro-level cellular mechanisms and macro-level structural declines synergistically interface with functional performance to dictate multidimensional quality of life in older populations. Previous reviews have predominantly focused either strictly on cellular neurobiology without evaluating broader daily autonomy or on epidemiological health outcomes without delineating the underlying neurological substrates. Furthermore, the role of compensatory neuroplasticity and social buffers against neurological deficits remains insufficiently integrated into comprehensive geriatric care models (Zhou et al., 2023). Therefore, this literature review was conducted to bridge these fragmented domains by providing an integrated synthesis of age-related central and peripheral nervous system alterations and elucidating their direct ramifications on functional capacity, falls, psychological well-being, and overall quality of life in older adults.

METHODS

This study utilized a structured literature review design to identify, evaluate, and synthesize recent scientific evidence regarding age-related neurological changes and their subsequent effects on quality of life in older individuals. The search strategy was executed systematically across four primary electronic databases: *PubMed*, *Scopus*, *ScienceDirect*, and *Google Scholar*. The query utilized specific Medical Subject Headings (*MeSH*) and free-text terms combined via *Boolean* operators (*AND*, *OR*). The primary search string was constructed as follows: ("aging" OR "aged" OR "older adults") AND ("nervous system" OR "neural aging" OR "brain atrophy" OR "synaptic plasticity") AND ("quality of life" OR "functional independence" OR "activities of daily living") AND ("motor function" OR "cognition" OR "gait" OR "balance").

The publication timeframe was restricted to peer-reviewed articles published between January 2020 and December 2025 to ensure the integration of contemporary neuroimaging, cellular, and geriatric findings. The eligibility criteria were guided by a defined framework. Studies were included if they met the following specifications: (1) observational cohorts, cross-sectional investigations, neuropathological studies, or conceptual reviews involving humans or translationally relevant models; (2) participants primarily classified as aging or older adults; (3) clear evaluation of structural, cellular, or functional nervous system alterations; and (4) measured impacts on cognitive capacity, motor performance, daily independence, or validated quality of life indices. Conversely, publications were excluded if they: (1) were duplicate citations; (2) constituted conference abstracts, letters to editors, or unpublished academic theses/dissertations; (3) focused exclusively on specific acute medical pathologies (such as

acute traumatic brain injury or stroke) without general relevance to aging processes; or (4) lacked available full-text access.

The initial database search yielded 1,240 records across *PubMed* ($n = 312$), *Scopus* ($n = 285$), *ScienceDirect* ($n = 415$), and *Google Scholar* ($n = 228$). After the automated removal of 348 duplicate citations, 892 unique titles and abstracts were screened against the eligibility criteria. This preliminary screening eliminated 784 articles that failed to align with the core thematic focus or investigated unrelated pharmacological trials. The remaining 108 full-text articles were comprehensively evaluated for methodological rigor, empirical validity, and analytical relevance. During this critical appraisal, 95 publications were excluded due to inappropriate target cohorts, lack of functional or quality of life endpoints, or insufficient neurological metrics. Ultimately, 13 core scientific articles were determined to fully meet all qualitative inclusion criteria and were incorporated into the final narrative synthesis.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Results

The 13 studies included in this review provide complementary evidence spanning molecular neuroscience, neuroimaging, biomechanical assessments, and epidemiological health surveys. Collectively, these investigations confirm that chronological aging induces multifaceted structural and physiological reorganizations within the nervous system. Microscopic disruptions, such as impaired vesicular recycling, cellular senescence, and neuroinflammation, interact dynamically with macroscopic volumetric losses and synaptic rarefaction. The evidence demonstrates that these neurobiological alterations are not uniform but are heavily modulated by compensatory cognitive reserve, baseline physical fitness, and external psychosocial buffers. To provide a structured comparative overview, the characteristics, core methodologies, identified analytical limitations, and primary findings of the 13 reviewed publications are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Reviewed Literature on Neurological Aging and Quality of Life

Study (Author, Year)	Main Focus	Method	Limitations	Main Findings
Bourdillon et al. (2020)	Structural changes and cognitive preservation	brain and analysis and cognitive profiling	Neuroimaging and does not account for longitudinal lifestyle factors	Brain atrophy and synaptic changes slow processing speed, though gross cognitive reserves may remain partially preserved.
Daghar et al. (2022)	Specific domains of cognitive decline	Cross-sectional cognitive assessment	Limited generalizability across varied socioeconomic backgrounds	Documented reductions in working memory capacity and processing speed, while crystallized baseline intelligence is preserved.

Li et al. (2024)	Neurological disorders and functional independence	Retrospective cohort study	Potential confounding variables in patient comorbidities	Neurological impairments directly correlate with increased dependence in daily living activities and degraded life satisfaction.
Kuchitsu et al. (2023)	Cellular mechanisms of neural aging	<i>In vitro</i> cellular analysis and biomarker tracking	Difficult to translate cellular findings directly to macro-behavioral changes	Disrupted cellular recycling and sustained inflammatory signaling reduce neuroplasticity and cellular survival.
Kawamata et al. (2023)	Neuroinflammation and metabolic dysfunction	Biochemical profiling and neuro-metabolic imaging	Focuses primarily on acute rather than chronic inflammatory markers	Elevated metabolic dysfunction and localized neuroinflammation suppress neuroadaptive capabilities in aging neural tissues.
Piper (2020)	Synaptic density and cognitive function	Synaptic mapping and quantitative literature synthesis	Lacks primary longitudinal clinical trial correlations	Reductions in synaptic arborization and neurotransmitter receptor densities directly underlie generalized cognitive slowing.
Adler (2024)	Sensorimotor integration in aging populations	Biomechanical balance testing and observational metrics	Sample size restricted to specific regional demographics	Peripheral sensory receptor degeneration compromises sensorimotor integration, leading to postural instability.
Sides et al. (2023)	Relationship between gait, cognition, and fall risk	Longitudinal gait analysis and cognitive tracking	Gait metrics may be partially influenced by coexisting	Spatiotemporal gait impairments are closely intertwined with executive dysfunction,

			orthopedic conditions	escalating incidents.	fall
Kicherova et al. (2021)	Fall risk assessment linked to cognition	Clinical fall-risk assessments and validated questionnaires	Relies partially on retrospective self-reported fall events	Cognitive impairments elevate vulnerability by compromising real-time obstacle avoidance strategies.	fall
Kujundžič-Vejzagič (2024)	Asymptomatic neuropathology	Post-mortem analysis and retrospective clinical data	Retrospective nature limits real-time cognitive tracking	Neuropathological modifications can be present in neural tissues even when clinical functional performance appears intact.	
Rice et al. (2021)	Epidemiology and quality-of-life impacts	Systematic review and meta-analytical synthesis	High heterogeneity among included epidemiological cohorts	Rising prevalence of neurofunctional decline exerts a substantial detrimental impact on perceived quality of life.	
Zhou et al. (2023)	Determinants of healthy aging and independence	Multivariate regression analysis of health databases	Cross-sectional nature limits the establishment of strict causality	Intact physical capacity, cognitive stability, functional autonomy, and robust social networks sustain quality of life.	
Yuzianah (2026)	Frailty, mobility, and quality of life	Prospective observational study	Metrics for physical frailty exhibit subjective variability across clinical settings	Physical frailty and progressive mobility deterioration are strongly associated with poor quality of life.	

The synthesis presented in Table 1 illustrates that chronological age precipitates interconnected changes across cellular, structural, and biomechanical domains. Neuropathological changes do not occur in total isolation; rather, cellular recycling failure and metabolic inflammation directly drive synaptic rarefaction and macroscopic cerebral atrophy (Bourdillon et al., 2020; Kawamata et al., 2023; Kuchitsu et al., 2023; Piper, 2020). When these central alterations converge with peripheral sensorimotor deficits, the resulting functional deficits manifest as abnormal gait patterns, reduced processing speed, and elevated fall risks (Adler, 2024; Daghar et al., 2022; Kicherova et al., 2021; Sides et al., 2023). Ultimately, this

cascade contributes to clinical frailty, progressive dependence in daily tasks, and lowered overall quality of life (Li et al., 2024; Rice et al., 2021; Yuzianah, 2026; Zhou et al., 2023).

Discussion

1. Neurobiological and Structural Substrates of Neural Aging

The structural and cellular findings compiled in this review establish that nervous system aging involves a progressive breakdown in basic cellular housekeeping mechanisms that eventually manifests as macro-level tissue atrophy. At the cellular level, the work of Kuchitsu et al. (2023) underscores the role of disrupted *autophagy* pathways and sustained intracellular stress signaling, which impair cellular waste clearance and predispose aged neurons to metabolic exhaustion. Concurrently, Kawamata et al. (2023) demonstrate that chronic neuro-metabolic dysfunction and persistent low-grade neuroinflammation diminish the brain's innate capacity for adaptive remodeling. These subclinical cellular stresses explain why functional reserves progressively contract, rendering aging neural networks increasingly susceptible to catastrophic decompensation when exposed to secondary physiological insults (Kawamata et al., 2023; Kuchitsu et al., 2023).

As these metabolic and cellular impairments persist over time, they culminate in measurable morphological changes within both the central and peripheral nervous systems. Piper (2020) demonstrated that the depletion of synaptic density and the loss of dendritic spine branching represent critical histological hallmarks that correlate directly with cognitive slowing. Volumetric neuroimaging investigations synthesize these findings by revealing pronounced cortical thinning and ventricular enlargement, most notably within prefrontal and hippocampal regions (Bourdillon et al., 2020). However, the presence of these morphological alterations does not invariably correlate with uniform clinical deficits across all individuals. As highlighted by Kujundžić-Vejzagić (2024), substantial neuropathological alterations may exist post-mortem in older individuals who maintained relatively intact cognitive performance *in vivo*, providing powerful evidence for cognitive reserve and compensatory neural networks that buffer against overt clinical deterioration.

2. Sensorimotor Integration, Gait Dynamics, and Cognitive Decline

The translation of central and peripheral neurostructural decline into observable physical disability is most clearly observed in the deterioration of sensorimotor integration and ambulatory biomechanics. Adler (2024) illustrated that peripheral mechanoreceptor attrition and peripheral nerve demyelination substantially delay afferent sensory inputs, thereby destabilizing balance maintenance mechanisms during standing and walking. Because peripheral proprioceptive feedback becomes sluggish, the aging central nervous system must allocate higher-order cognitive resources to supervise routine motor tasks (Adler, 2024; Daghar et al., 2022). Consequently, older adults rely heavily on executive cognitive control to compensate for sensorimotor deficits, transforming routine locomotion into a complex, dual-task activity (Daghar et al., 2022; Sides et al., 2023).

When cognitive processing resources are themselves constrained by age-related prefrontal changes, this compensatory mechanism falters, leading to pronounced gait instability and elevated fall hazards. Sides et al. (2023) demonstrated a direct link between longitudinal gait variability—such as shortened stride length and erratic cadence—and progressive executive cognitive decline. This dynamic was corroborated by Kicherova et al. (2021), who identified subclinical cognitive impairments as primary independent risk factors for recurrent falls in older cohorts. When older adults encounter unexpected spatial hazards, delayed central processing impedes the rapid execution of protective postural strategies, precipitating

catastrophic falls (Adler, 2024; Kicherova et al., 2021). The progressive loss of physical confidence following such events initiates a cycle of reduced physical activity, accelerating the transition from pre-frailty into severe physical disability (Sides et al., 2023; Yuzianah, 2026).

3. Ramifications on Functional Autonomy, Psychosocial Well-Being, and Quality of Life

The ultimate clinical endpoint of age-related neurological deterioration is the progressive compromise of functional independence and personal quality of life across multiple life domains. Li et al. (2024) established that the accumulation of neurological deficits correlates directly with escalating difficulties in executing activities of daily living (*ADLs*), including bathing, dressing, meal preparation, and medication management. As autonomy erodes, older individuals experience an involuntary transition into dependency on family caregivers or institutional facilities, which severely undermines their self-efficacy and perceived dignity (Li et al., 2024; Rice et al., 2021). In their systematic analysis, Rice et al. (2021) emphasized that physical limitations frequently trigger secondary psychological distress, including clinical depression, anxiety, and profound social isolation.

Furthermore, the intersection between neurological decline, mobility limitations, and physical frailty represents a primary driver of reduced life satisfaction in late adulthood. Yuzianah (2026) demonstrated that frailty is not merely a muscular phenomenon, but a complex neuro-musculoskeletal syndrome wherein impaired mobility exacerbates self-reported deficits in quality of life. Older adults who perceive their physical vulnerability often withdraw from community activities, forfeiting beneficial cognitive stimulation and interpersonal connections (Yuzianah, 2026; Zhou et al., 2023). Nevertheless, this downward spiral is not inevitable. Zhou et al. (2023) revealed that robust social support networks and preserved physical capabilities can act as critical external buffers that attenuate the psychological impacts of neurofunctional decline. Maintaining holistic engagement and environmental adaptation can preserve positive quality of life outcomes even amidst observable physiological aging (Rice et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2023).

4. Clinical Implications for Geriatric Practice and Public Health Policies

The synthesized evidence across the 13 reviewed publications underscores the critical necessity of transitioning from reactive, symptom-driven geriatric medicine toward proactive, neuro-protective healthcare paradigms. Because macroscopic neurological impairments and mobility deficits are preceded by extensive subclinical cellular and synaptic alterations, early multimodal screening is paramount (Kawamata et al., 2023; Piper, 2020). Primary care practitioners must incorporate sensitive dual-task gait evaluations and domain-specific cognitive assessments into routine geriatric examinations to intercept neurofunctional decline at preclinical stages (Daghar et al., 2022; Sides et al., 2023). Standardized functional evaluations should routinely assess fall risks, sensorimotor acuity, and *ADL* performance before irreversible functional loss manifests (Adler, 2024; Kicherova et al., 2021; Li et al., 2024).

From a therapeutic perspective, non-pharmacological interventions represent the most robust and evidence-based means of stimulating neuroplasticity and preserving functional capacity in aging populations. Structured physical regimens integrating aerobic conditioning, progressive resistance training, and balance challenges promote neurotrophin secretion, enhance synaptic connectivity, and directly mitigate frailty (Bourdillon et al., 2020; Piper, 2020; Yuzianah, 2026). Simultaneously, structured cognitive stimulation programs help optimize cognitive reserve, enabling the aging brain to compensate for anatomical tissue losses (Kujundžič-Vejzagič, 2024). On a broader scale, public health policies must foster community environments that facilitate active living, minimize architectural fall hazards, and provide



accessible psychosocial frameworks (Rice et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2023). By aligning clinical interventions with supportive social policies, healthcare systems can successfully optimize both functional longevity and overall quality of life for the growing older adult population.

CONCLUSION

Age-related changes in the nervous system represent a complex, progressive continuum involving interconnected cellular, structural, and physiological declines across both central and peripheral pathways. These alterations—manifested through cerebral atrophy, synaptic rarefaction, neuroinflammation, delayed signal conduction, and degraded sensorimotor integration—collectively diminish information processing speed, executive function, and gait stability. Consequently, older adults experience an elevated susceptibility to balance disturbances, catastrophic falls, and functional dependency, which profoundly degrade their autonomy, psychological well-being, and perceived quality of life.

Effectively mitigating the clinical and societal burdens of neurological aging demands an integrated, multidisciplinary geriatric healthcare strategy that shifts the focus from late-stage intervention to early prevention. Healthcare systems must institutionalize routine dual-task gait and cognitive screenings to identify preclinical neurofunctional decline, coupled with targeted exercise and cognitive stimulation programs that leverage preserved neuroplasticity. Furthermore, integrating structured clinical management with accessible community-based social support frameworks is imperative to preserve functional independence, foster resilience, and sustain optimal quality of life throughout the aging lifespan.

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