

Signs of Illness

Support Person Fact Sheet

Key Facts

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) often have more secondary health conditions than those who do not experience I/DD. Secondary health conditions are health problems that can be prevented and/or managed. It is important to have regular health check-ups and watch out for signs of health problems.



Common Signs that a Person May Be Ill

If a person finds it hard to communicate that they are feeling sick, you should watch out for signs that may point to a possible health problem. Some of those signs may include observations that the person:

- Seems sad
- Is reluctant to do things that are part of their regular daily activities
- Doesn't want to eat
- Has challenging behavior
- Looks tired and has no energy
- Has unexplained bleeding from the anus or vagina

Watch for Signs of Common Health Problems

- Hearing problems: Do they seem to ignore you? Do they have the volume turned up very loud?
- Vision problems: Do they seem hesitant on stairs? Do they have trouble finding things nearby?
- Tooth or gum disease: Are they holding their jaw, or refusing food? Do their gums bleed when their teeth are being cleaned? Do they have bad breath?
- Gastric problems: Are they vomiting? Do they seem in pain after eating?
- Swallowing problems: Do they take a long time to eat or does food fall out of their mouth? Do they cough or choke when eating or drinking?
- Arthritis: Do they have trouble using small items, such as a knife and fork? Do they seem uncomfortable when moving around?
- Poor nutrition: Do they lack energy? Are they underweight or overweight? Are they developing pressure sores?
- Bowel problems: Do they seem to have pain in the abdomen or when trying to defecate?
- Chest infections: Watch very carefully for this if the person is immobile. Can you hear a rattle or wheezing sound in their chest when they breathe? Are they breathing fast? Do they have a cough or a temperature? Does their skin have a bluish tinge especially around the mouth and fingertips?
- Muscle and joint problems: Are they holding a part of their body, or having trouble moving? Are they immobile? Look for any redness or swelling.

- **Diabetes:** Excessive thirst, frequent urination, tiredness and frequent infections may point to diabetes. Being overweight and not having enough exercise increases the risk of diabetes. Is there a family history of diabetes?
- **Skin disease:** Is there a skin rash? Are they scratching or picking at their skin? Is skin dry and scaly?
- **Epilepsy:** Do they seem to be in a daydream? Do they have seizures or muscle spasms? Have they forgotten something they would normally remember? Do they have unexplained drowsiness?
- **Mental illness:** Do they lack desire to do normal things? Do they seem depressed or anxious? Are they hurting themselves or other people? Have you noticed behavior changes?
- **Grief:** Are they tearful? Are they having trouble concentrating?
- **Dementia:** Are they becoming forgetful? Do they seem lost in familiar places? Are they losing the ability to perform everyday skills?
- **Reactions to medication:** Has their behavior changed? Have they gotten a rash, swelling, vomiting, or diarrhea? Are they falling over or very sleepy?
- **Sleep apnea:** Do they snore? Are they restless at night? Do they seem tired when they awaken in the morning? Do they seem drowsy in the daytime? Do they have trouble concentrating?

If a person with I/DD is showing any of these symptoms, it is important to have a doctor check to see if there is a medical problem that can be treated.

Organize Regular Wellness Check-Ups

No matter how alert you are to signs that a person is unwell, there might be health problems that you and the doctor are not aware of. It is important that the person has regular, routine health and wellness check-ups. This may look different for each person. You can support the person as they check in with their health care team.

For more information:

[Click here to learn more about common diseases and conditions \(URL: https://www.cdc.gov/diseasesconditions/index.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/diseasesconditions/index.html)

Related fact sheets:

Support Person Fact Sheet: Supporting Annual Wellness Check-Ups

Support Person Fact Sheet: Supporting Oral Health

Support Person Fact Sheet: Supporting Mental Health Concerns

This fact sheet was created in June 2021.

The fact sheet contains general information only and does not take into account individual circumstances. It should not be relied on for medical advice. We encourage you to review the information in this fact sheet within the context of educational purposes and when appropriate, share it with your health professional to decide whether the information is right for you.

This module was adapted from NSW Council for Intellectual Disabilities (2009), Australia. The toolkit and its components were supported in part by the grant or cooperative agreement number DD000014, funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and by the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Administration on Community Living grant #90DDUC0039. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Administration on Community Living, or the Department of Health and Human Services