

Signs and Symptoms of Illness

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) get sick just like the rest of us. They may have increased risk for some health problems and may have difficulty communicating specifics when they are feeling ill. It is important for caregivers to know the person when they are well and to understand how they might communicate they are not well.



Some illnesses or symptoms are obvious. They could be emergencies, like physical injuries, bleeding, trouble breathing, vomiting, and diarrhea. Other symptoms are more invisible and rely on the individual communicating about the symptom or the caregiver noticing that something is wrong. Examples of more invisible symptoms are headaches, toothaches, constipation, infections, and depression.



If the person has difficulty communicating how they feel and when they might be sick, it is important that caregivers pay attention to actions and behaviors that might indicate something is wrong. Knowing and recording a person's regular routine and habits helps to see when things are off and provides information health care providers need to identify and treat a problem.

Common Signs that A Person Might Be Sick

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. These signs may indicate illness that should be attended to.

The person:

- Doesn't want to do things that are part of their regular daily activities or that they enjoy
- Doesn't want to eat
- Resists personal care.
- Has a change in behavior
- Looks tired and has no energy
- Seems sad
- Has unexplained bleeding or rash

Common Health Problems and Clues

- **Hearing problems:** Do they seem to ignore you? Do they want the TV volume turned up very loud?
- **Vision problems:** Do they seem hesitant on stairs? Do they have trouble finding things that are 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?
- **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:** 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 periods of 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 disorders:** 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 or seem irritable?

Organize Regular Wellness Check-Ups

No matter how alert you are to signs that a person is sick, there might be health problems that you and the doctor are not aware of. Regular health check-ups can help watch for signs of health problems and might help prevent a chronic problem from developing or worsening. This may look different for each person. You can support the person as they check in with their health care team.

Acknowledgement

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The information provided is for general use and not medical advice or intended to address any individual situation.