



## Common health problems that social care staff should be aware of

### Health in people with learning disabilities



People with learning disabilities have poorer health than other people and die younger.

There are certain health problems that they are more likely to have than other people.

Social care staff should be aware of these health problems and how to support the person to manage them and get good treatment when necessary.

### Common health problems to be aware of



**Epilepsy** is more than 20 times more common in people with learning disabilities than people without. It is one of the most common reasons for avoidable hospital admissions for people with learning disabilities.

People with epilepsy who also have learning disabilities are less likely to have it well controlled than others and some do not get the regular reviews they need. Guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence<sup>1</sup> (NICE) says that people with learning disabilities should have the same access to treatment as everyone else.

There is a Public Health England report<sup>2</sup> with links to lots of information about epilepsy.



**Respiratory disease** (disease of the airways or lungs) is the main cause of death in people with learning disabilities. That means it is very important that people with learning disabilities have an annual flu jab. People with learning disabilities can get a free flu jab at their GP surgery. There is more information about this here.<sup>3</sup>

There is a Public Health England report<sup>4</sup> with advice on how to support people with learning disabilities to have injections.

**Dysphagia** means swallowing difficulties. Nearly one in ten people with learning disabilities have difficulty swallowing. Lack of teeth for biting and chewing food often makes this worse. This can cause three sorts of problem: choking, chest infections from food or drink 'going down the wrong way' into their lungs, and malnutrition. People with learning disabilities commonly die from these problems.



Swallowing problems can be managed several ways. These include choosing appropriate foods and learning about the importance of eating slowly and chewing properly. In some cases, people need to be fed through a tube into their stomach (PEG feeding).

If people have problems swallowing, this problem needs to be assessed and monitored. This is usually done mainly by speech and language therapists. It is important that social care staff are confident they have the right advice about how to manage eating problems in people they are caring for and can give the right support to make sure they are eating and drinking safely.

There is a Learning Disabilities Observatory [report<sup>5</sup>](#) with links to lots of resources about dysphagia.

**Constipation** is a common problem in people with learning disabilities. They are more likely to have constipation because of lack of exercise, poor diet and side effects of medication.



Untreated constipation can be extremely painful and very serious. This can cause challenging behaviour and is likely to prevent people doing the things they normally enjoy. In the worst cases it can lead to death. In looking after a person with learning disabilities it is important that someone knows whether they are managing to have their bowels open reasonably regularly and without difficulty. It is particularly important to keep a check this if they are put on new medicines. If there are problems these should be discussed with a GP.

There is a Public Health England [report<sup>6</sup>](#) with information about managing constipation.

**Diabetes** needs regular attention. People with diabetes need to be careful with their diet, take medication either as pills or by injections, and monitor their blood sugar. At home, people with learning disabilities are likely to need help with all of these. Help in choosing the right amounts of the right foods and avoiding additional sugar in sweets is particularly important.



In addition to regular monitoring at home, people with diabetes need to have blood tests and foot and eye checks done regularly, usually at their doctor's surgery.

All these are important because poorly controlled diabetes can lead to hospitalisation, or to losing limbs or sight because of damage to blood vessels.

There is a Public Health England [report<sup>7</sup>](#) with links to lots of resources about diabetes.



**Mental health problems** are more common in people with learning disabilities. Depression can be difficult to diagnose in people with more severe learning disabilities or with communication difficulties. Look out for signs that someone is depressed, such as weight loss, a change in sleep pattern, or someone wanting to be alone.



**Dementia** cannot be cured but its progress can be slowed with anti-dementia drugs. This treatment is more likely to help if a diagnosis is made early.

Diagnosis of dementia in people with learning disabilities is easier if there has been an assessment of how the person functions when they are still healthy. People with Down's syndrome are likely to get dementia at a younger age so this should be done from about the age of 30.<sup>8</sup> Contact the local community learning disability team to ask about a baseline assessment.

There is a Public Health England [report](#)<sup>9</sup> with links to lots of information about dementia.

### Key messages:

- it is important that social care staff are aware of the common health problems that people with learning disabilities may have
- there is lots of information available to help support common health problems in people with learning disabilities
- people with learning disabilities may need regular check-ups if they have certain health problems
- people with learning disabilities may need input from specialists to help manage their health problems

This is the sixth in a series of health factsheets for social care staff. You can find others and more [guidance](#) for social care providers.

There is a [supporting set of slides](#) for this document that can be used by social care staff as a training resource.

The pictures in this factsheet are from Photosymbols: [www.photosymbols.co.uk](http://www.photosymbols.co.uk)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/cg137>

<sup>2</sup>

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160704153141/http://www.improvinghealthandlives.org.uk/gsf.php5?f=313318>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/flu-vaccinations-for-people-with-learning-disabilities>

<sup>4</sup>

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/646489/Blood\\_tests\\_for\\_people\\_with\\_learning\\_disabilities.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/646489/Blood_tests_for_people_with_learning_disabilities.pdf)

<sup>5</sup>

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160704153141/https://www.improvinghealthandlives.org.uk/gsf.php5?f=314186>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.ndti.org.uk/uploads/files/Constipation\\_RA\\_report\\_final.pdf](https://www.ndti.org.uk/uploads/files/Constipation_RA_report_final.pdf)

<sup>7</sup>

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160704153141/http://www.improvinghealthandlives.org.uk/gsf.php5?f=16981>

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.bps.org.uk/system/files/Public%20files/rep77\\_dementia\\_and\\_id.pdf](http://www.bps.org.uk/system/files/Public%20files/rep77_dementia_and_id.pdf)

<sup>9</sup>

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160704153141/http://www.improvinghealthandlives.org.uk/gsf.php5?f=17985>