



Supporting people with learning disabilities to have a healthy diet and be active

Background



People with learning disabilities are more likely to be severely overweight (obese) than people in the general population. Women with learning disabilities are even more likely to be obese.

People who are obese are at much greater risk of health problems such as heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, diabetes and mobility difficulties.

The two main ways to reduce weight are diet and exercise.



For most people, bringing their weight down to healthy levels involves both exercising more and eating healthier amounts of healthier foods as well as avoiding fattening foods and sugary drinks.

People with learning disabilities are less likely to do regular exercise and eat a balanced diet with enough fruit and vegetables.

Barriers to losing weight for people with learning disabilities

There are lots of reasons why it may be difficult for people with learning disabilities to lose weight.



Some people with learning disabilities don't do exercise because they don't understand the benefits of it.

It can take more time to cook a healthy meal than to have a ready meal.

Lack of time and lack of support staff can make it difficult for people to eat healthy foods and to take exercise.

Risk assessment issues can stop people doing physical exercise.



Some people take medication that makes them put on weight.

Some places like the gym and swimming pool can be difficult to get to, expensive, not easy to access and people don't always feel welcome.



When supporting someone with a learning disability, it can be difficult to balance issues of choice and the duty of care around diet and exercise, especially when someone is making unhealthy choices. People do have the right to make unwise choices if they have the capacity to make the decision. However, people need the right information and support to understand risks and the consequences of their choices properly.

It is important that support workers understand the principles of informed choice. There is an [information sheet](#) about this.¹

Support workers have an important role to play in best interests decisions about diet and exercise and putting these decisions in place when someone does not have capacity to make their own decisions.

How to help someone lose weight



Weight loss interventions work better if support workers are included. They can help to provide motivational and practical support. There should be a consistent approach from everyone who supports the person who needs to lose weight.

Help the person to plan and cook more healthy meals.

Social care staff should have training and good information about buying and cooking healthy food.



Encourage the person to be more active.² Try to find things they enjoy doing that are more active. If they like swimming suggest a trip to the swimming pool.

There are lots of easy-read resources on healthy eating and physical activity. You can find a list of these in our [report](#).³



There are lots of weight loss programmes and groups in local communities. You could find out more information about these and offer to support the person to take part.

Avoid using food and drinks as a reward.

Think about if you are a good role model for healthy choices.



Encourage the person you support to attend an annual health check. This is a good opportunity to think about weight management. There is an information sheet about [annual health checks](#).⁴

The Health Equalities Framework⁵ offers a tool that can be used by supporters to discuss risks to health and wellbeing. The easy read version can be used to encourage discussion about balancing risks, for example, the risks posed by being overweight alongside the risks of limiting choice.

Key messages:

- a lot of people with learning disabilities do not eat a balanced diet or do regular exercise
- people with learning disabilities are at a high risk of being obese
- being obese can cause other health problems
- there are lots of reasons why it may be difficult for people with learning disabilities to lose weight
- social care staff can help people to eat more healthily and to be more active
- there are lots of resources to help with this

This is the seventh 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

First published: October 2017

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PHE supports the UN
Sustainable Development Goals



¹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/655376/Social_care_staff_briefing_sheet_on_Mental_Capacity_Act_in_learning_disabilities.pdf

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/health-matters-getting-every-adult-active-every-day/health-matters-getting-every-adult-active-every-day>

³ https://www.ndti.org.uk/uploads/files/Obesity_RA_report_final.pdf

⁴ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/655374/Social_care_staff_supporting_annual_health_check_in_learning_disabilities.pdf

⁵ <https://www.ndti.org.uk/resources/useful-tools/the-health-equality-framework-and-commissioning-guide1>