

General guidance for when individuals with intellectual disabilities should be taken to the Emergency Department

In community placements and programs, the staff members working directly with individuals with intellectual disabilities are the first, critical component to preventing a medical catastrophe. This is no easy task as most staff members are not medically trained, and a number of the individuals being served may have difficulty presenting or describing their symptoms. Furthermore, a number of individuals with intellectual disabilities already have medical conditions. This can make it more difficult to decide when to call a doctor or take them for medical evaluation, but it may also mean that the individual is more likely to experience complications that can worsen their prognosis.

Fortunately, the staff members who daily work with people who are intellectually disabled are often very astute at recognizing that an individual is “different” or that the individual is not his usual “self”. This recognition of when symptoms are new or different can make the difference when it comes to prompt medical attention and recovery.

Generally, we want to err on the side of caution when trying to decide when to call a doctor, especially for individuals who have difficulty identifying or articulating their symptoms or who have ongoing medical problems, multiple medical problems, impairments in their ability to move around independently or robustly, or who have histories of cardiac, respiratory, or abdominal conditions.

The following is a list of symptoms, injuries and conditions, which when observed should alert a provider or family member to the need for immediate medical attention:

Confusion: Symptoms of confusion include forgetting things typically remembered, getting lost, repeating words, mistaking people or objects for someone or something else and talking “nonsense”. It is especially important to be alert to the symptoms of confusion when an individual has:

- a head injury,
- new onset of a physical illness,
- weakness (whether general or one sided),
- chest pain, shortness of breath, or
- complaints of abdominal pain or any intense pain.

Drowsiness: Drowsiness means that an individual is hard to arouse or keep awake, or is experiencing increasing sedation over a period of hours. It is especially important to be alert to symptoms of drowsiness when an individual has:

- a head injury,
- new onset of a physical illness,
- weakness (whether general or one sided),
- chest pain,
- shortness of breath, or
- complaints of abdominal (stomach) pain or any intense pain.

Fainting or Dizziness: Fainting or dizziness may signal the need for medical attention if it is severe or if it interferes with walking, eating, drinking, or other usual activities.

Head trauma/injury: Seek emergency medical care when an individual is found to have a head trauma such as a bump, a bruise also called a contusion, or a cut on the head; or any other injury that an individual may have to the head especially if the injury results in a loss of consciousness, however briefly, and/or is followed by:

- confusion,
- drowsiness,
- severe headache,
- changes in vision,
- falling or decrease in coordination,
- vomiting, or
- seizure.

Falls: Seek emergency medical care any time an individual falls and hits his head and is followed by any one of the following:

- confusion,
- drowsiness,
- severe headache,
- changes in vision,
- falling or decrease in coordination,
- vomiting, or
- seizure.

Seizures: A seizure, if the individual is not known to have seizures or the seizure is different in symptoms or duration.

Sudden changes in sensory or motor functioning: Changes in sensory or motor functioning include a change or loss of vision, numbness, or difficulty with talking, understanding, coordination or walking.

Chest pain or pressure: An individual requires emergency medical attention whenever he or she experiences chest pain or pressure that has not been previously diagnosed, especially if associated with:

- shortness of breath,
- sweating, or
- pain that radiates or spreads into the neck, back, left arm, or abdomen.

Trouble breathing: Signs of breathing problems include breathing fast, gasping, involving abdominal and neck muscles, with audible wheezing or rasping.

Call 911 if an individual is having trouble breathing and there is any blueness around lips.

Take an individual to a doctor right away or call 911 if an individual is having difficulty breathing:

- and has just eaten or had a drink,
- if there is fever,
- if the individual is mostly in bed or wheelchair and suddenly is having trouble breathing, or
- if breathing difficulty is accompanied by chest pain, severe abdominal pain or other sudden onset severe pain.

Abdominal pain or “swelling”: Emergency medical care should be provided if an individual experiences sudden or severe abdominal pain, especially if it is accompanied by any of the following:

- nausea and vomiting,
- abdomen is distended (the stomach “swells”),
- not having regular bowel movements or has had constipation in past few days,
- if there is blood in stools, or
- if the individual becomes drowsy or confused.

Two things are wrong at once: Any time an individual with intellectual disabilities had two or more different symptoms. For example, an individual has nausea/vomiting and coughing a lot of with phlegm, or an individual has urinary burning and frequency plus hard productive cough, or an individual has severe cough and is confused or drowsy, and so forth.

Wound: Any cut or other wound through the skin. Any wound with wood or metal debris left in the skin.

Bleeding: Any bleeding, including a nosebleed that does not stop in ten minutes with applied pressure.

Sting or insect bite: An insect bite requires medical attention when there is:

- increasing swelling,
- a rash,
- swelling of face or hands, and/or
- trouble breathing.

Vomiting or coughing up blood. Any time an individual vomits blood or coughs up blood is a signal of the need for immediate medical attention.

Blood in the stools or urine. Any blood in an individual’s stools or in the individual’s urine is a signal of the need for immediate medical attention.

Severe pain: A doctor should be called when the severe pain is new or sudden.

Illness that becomes worse: When an individual is really sick for any reason and gets worse over 24 hours, even if the individual has already been to the doctor or to the emergency room for the same illness.

The **American College of Emergency Physicians (ACEP)** offers a list of warning signs that indicate a medical emergency.

- Difficulty breathing, shortness of breath
- Chest or upper abdominal pain or pressure
- Fainting, sudden dizziness, weakness
- Changes in vision
- Confusion or changes in mental status
- Any sudden or severe pain
- Uncontrolled bleeding
- Severe or persistent vomiting or diarrhea
- Coughing or vomiting blood
- Suicidal feelings
- Difficulty speaking
- Shortness of breath
- Unusual abdominal pain