



General guidance for when an individual 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.

Fortunately, the staff members who work daily with people who are intellectually disabled are often very astute at recognizing that an individual is “different” or that the individual is not his/her usual “self”. Recognizing when these 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, when observed should alert a provider or family member to seek immediate medical attention. This is not an inclusive list if the individual has symptoms that are not listed here and you deem them as being emergent cause please seek medical attention or report the symptoms to a professional healthcare provider:

Trouble breathing: Shortness of breath should be taken very seriously. There are many causes of shortness of breath such as:

- asthma
- pneumonia
- heart failure
- allergic reaction
- anemia

Signs and symptoms of shortness of breath include but not limited to: breathing fast, gasping, using abdominal and neck muscles with breathing and audible wheezing or rasping.

Call 911 if an individual is experiencing severe shortness of breath that comes on suddenly. If the shortness of breath is accompanied by chest pain, fainting or severe abdominal pain emergency medical care should be sought.

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.



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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. Symptoms to be aware of with head injuries include but are not limited to:

- 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.



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Chest pain or pressure: Seek emergency medical attention whenever an individual 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.

Abdominal pain or “swelling”: Seek emergency medical attention 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.

Wounds/Lacerations: Seek emergency medical attention if an individual has sustained a severe cut or wound on their body. Reasons to seek emergency attention include but not limited to:

- large/deep wounds
- bleeding that will not stop with applied pressure
- numbness/tingling near the site
- foreign object in the cut/wound
- bitten by an animal
- unsure of last tetanus shot

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

Severe pain: Emergency medical care may be indicated for severe pain anywhere on the body that is new and sudden

Source: <https://medlineplus.gov/ency/patientinstructions/000593.htm>

Updated: November 2016