



Practice Alert

Comprehensive health assessment

July 2021

This practice alert was prepared by the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care, as a joint publication with the NDIS Commission.

Key points

- People with disability are at high risk of poor health, chronic disease and premature death from potentially preventable causes.
- The completion of a regular comprehensive health assessment for people with disability improves detection of health needs, enables active management of those needs, and significantly reduces health risks and poor health outcomes.
- Participants have a right to maintain optimal physical, oral and mental health.
- Providers are required to monitor participant health, safety and wellbeing, support participants to maintain their health and to access appropriate health services.

Risks of health problems for people with disability

People with disability are at risk of poor health and conditions that are not yet diagnosed.

The 2019 NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission, *Scoping Review into the Causes and Contributors to the Deaths of People with a Disability*, completed by Dr Carmela Salomon and Professor Julian Trollor, found that people with disability are at an increased risk of potentially avoidable deaths. Many people were experiencing multiple health problems at the time of death, including epilepsy and poor nutritional, oral and mental health.

These risks are more likely for people with disability due to a combination of the following:

- Some people with disability may not be able to communicate when they feel unwell or experience pain. They may communicate in ways that are specific to them, and not well understood by others
- A person's symptoms or behaviours are attributed to their disability and, as a result, they do not receive appropriate health assessments or treatments
- A mix of individual, medical, communication and social problems. These may be due to disability, health conditions that run in the family, poor nutrition, inappropriate accommodation, abuse and neglect, homelessness, inadequate preventative health care or treatment
- Lifestyle factors, such as obesity, physical inactivity, isolation, smoking and alcohol intake.

How to address these health risks

Health risks can be addressed through the following interventions.

Identify symptoms early

Early identification of changes in a participant's health and wellbeing means that the participant can access medical services earlier and may prevent illness from progressing. It is important to have good knowledge of the participant's usual health so that changes can be observed. Obvious changes would include unexpected weight loss or gain, a sudden change in eating habits, sudden breathlessness, a drop in activity due to fatigue, expressions of pain and apparent sudden changes in behaviour.

Developing trust with a participant and knowing how they communicate will also assist the participant to tell you that they are unwell.

Promptly visit a general practitioner (GP)

Health risks are also addressed by ensuring participants are supported to promptly access a GP when unwell or changes to their usual health are noticed.

Undertake a regular comprehensive health assessment resulting in a healthcare plan

A comprehensive health assessment involves the participant and GP discussing and reviewing the participant's medical history, current health problems, medications and any lifestyle risks.

The GP will, based on health information and physical examination, recommend what the participant requires for good health and wellbeing. The GP will also recommend and refer the participant for relevant preventative health care such as regular screening for serious conditions. For example: skin cancer checks; breast and/or or bowel cancer screening.

The participant, GP and provider can then develop a healthcare plan based on the recommendations from the comprehensive health assessment.

Regular comprehensive health assessments have been shown to prevent illness and maintain the health and wellbeing of people with disability. These outcomes are a result of identifying unmet health needs, preventing disease, engaging in regular health care and improving communication with the GP.

Be proactive with chronic illness

Both the medical practitioner and the participant can proactively manage chronic illness by monitoring symptoms that might indicate a change to health status, making changes to lifestyle if needed and attending regular medical appointments, and managing chronic illness and disease. For instance, regular blood tests for diabetes, blood pressure monitoring and medication reviews.

Supporting participants

Providers are required to monitor participants' health, safety and wellbeing, support participants to maintain their health and to access appropriate health services.

Providers should support the participant to access annual comprehensive health assessments.

Support participants to understand their own health needs and to make informed health decisions

- Talk to participants about their health and develop a healthcare plan.
- Support participant's understanding of health through the provision of accessible health information; see the resource section below for ideas and tools.
- Facilitate informed decision making regarding health care using the participant's preferred communication methods. Involve the participant's family, independent support person or guardian in the decision making process, where appropriate.

Support participants to communicate with healthcare providers

- If required, work with a speech pathologist to create or expand a personal communication system for the participant so that they have a way of saying when they are unwell. This could include words/signs/symbols that can describe pain, nausea and fever, or anxiety, emotional distress.
- Consider the level of support the participant requires to make and attend a medical appointment with the GP or to have blood tests, scans or other procedures.
- Support participants to build a relationship with their GP through regular contact.
- Assist the participant to use their preferred method of communication with the GP or healthcare provider during appointments.

Support participants to access healthcare when needed

- Encourage the participant to let you know if they do not feel well using their preferred communication methods.
- Have a good understanding of the participant's health and potential symptoms to watch out for; this includes when there are changed behaviours or function.
- Support the participant to attend the GP if they are unwell.
- Support participants with chronic illness to understand their symptoms, treatment plans, recommended lifestyle changes and visit their GP regularly.
- The [Practice Alert: Transitions of care between disability services and hospitals](#) provides guidance on supporting participants when they are admitted and discharged from hospitals.

Support participants to access preventative healthcare

- Support the participant to follow their healthcare plan.
- Preventative healthcare also involves regular medical and dental check-ups in between annual comprehensive health assessments.
- The Practice Alert: Lifestyle Risk Factors provides information on changes to lifestyle that improve health outcomes.

Plan and support participant's health appointments

- Support the participant to make a GP appointment or, with consent make the appointment on their behalf.
- Arrange transport, telehealth facilities, parking if required. Workers should familiarise themselves with the health facility/GP office to support the participant's access to appointments.
- Consider if it will be a difficult day for the participant, are there likely to be long waiting times, will they experience fatigue and how is that best managed?
- Communicate with the GP about the participant's triggers for distress, communication aids or physical access requirements.
- Time the health assessment on a day when it is likely to be less busy in the general practice. Often Mondays and Fridays are very busy times. Talk to the general practice and make a time that works for both the participant and the GP.

Maintain participant health and medical information

- Ensure relevant support staff have access to important health information including current health problems, medications, allergies, adverse effects from medications, and reports from medical specialists and allied health professionals.
- Ensure that a record of each visit to a health professional is kept in the participant's file and this is made available each time the participant sees a health professional.
- Ensure that any health care recommendations are documented and actioned following appointments with health care professionals.
- Implement organisational systems to ensure that regular and timely reviews are undertaken on participant medical and health records, and in time for comprehensive health assessments.
- Prior to a comprehensive health assessment (at least annually), a full review of participant records should be undertaken to identify concerns, risks, or any information about potentially undiagnosed symptoms that may not have been followed up.
- Maintain participants' health records in line with privacy and confidentiality requirements.

Provider obligations

NDIS Code of Conduct

Providers and workers must comply with the NDIS Code of Conduct when providing supports or services to NDIS participants.

The NDIS Code of Conduct requires all NDIS providers and workers who provide NDIS supports or services to NDIS participants to, among other things:

- act with respect for individual rights to freedom of expression, self-determination and decision-making in accordance with applicable laws and conventions
- provide supports and services in a safe and competent manner with care and skill
- promptly take steps to raise and act on concerns about matters that may impact the quality and safety of supports and services provided to people with disability.

NDIS Practice Standards

If you are a registered NDIS provider, you must comply with the [National Disability Insurance Scheme \(Provider Registration and Practice Standards\) Rules 2018](#) as part of your conditions of registration. The NDIS Practice Standards relate to the delivery of safe, quality supports and services, and the management of risks associated with the supports you provide to NDIS participants.

In delivering NDIS support and services, providers must also demonstrate compliance with the [National Disability Insurance Scheme \(Quality Indicators\) Guidelines 2018](#). The NDIS Commission's guidance on the [NDIS Practice Standards and Quality Indicators](#) provides a further resource to assist registered NDIS providers to understand their obligations.

The NDIS Practice Standards that are most relevant to this alert include:

- **Support planning:** each participant is actively involved in the development of their support plans. Support plans reflect participant needs, requirements, preferences, strengths, and goals, and are regularly reviewed.
- **Access to supports:** each participant accesses the most appropriate supports that meet their needs, goals and preferences.
- **Responsive Support Provision:** Each participant accesses responsive, timely, competent and appropriate supports to meet their needs, desired outcomes and goals.
- **Incident Management:** Each participant is safeguarded by the provider's incident management system, ensuring that incidents are acknowledged, responded to, well-managed and learned from.
- **Information Management:** Each participant's information is managed to ensure that it is identifiable, accurately recorded, current and confidential. Each participant's information is easily accessible to the participant and appropriately utilised by relevant workers.

Resources

Comprehensive assessments

- [Health Direct tool to find and access GPs, community health services](#), this is a government funded web based health search engine
- The Commonwealth Department of Health GP factsheet: [Health Assessment for people with intellectual disability under the Medicare Benefits Schedule](#). The Medicare Benefits Schedule allows for brief, standard, long or prolonged consultation times with GPs.
- [The Comprehensive Assessment Program \(CHAP\)](#) is a validated tool to assist the participant, carer or guardians gather information for a comprehensive health assessment. The tool incurs a licence fee and is updated annually. NDIS workers can assist the participant and their supporters to gather information and provide it to the GP for review.

Health toolkits

The following websites provide a variety of tools, easy read documents and resources to assist participants, families and NDIS workers with health appointments and procedures

- Queensland Centre for Intellectual and Developmental Disability, [QCIDD Resources to support access to health services and manage health](#)
- [Down Syndrome Australia Health toolkit for professionals](#)
- NSW Council for Intellectual Disability
 - [Health Guide Resources](#)
 - [Health Fact Sheets](#)
 - [My Health Matters Folder](#)

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- [NSW University Department of Developmental Neuropsychiatry \(3DN\)](#). The 3DN site includes tools and training resources. Some samples are:
 - [Getting help with your mental health](#)
 - [Staying healthy postcard to take to the doctor](#)
 - [For people with lived experience](#)
 - Speech Pathology Australia Series [SPA FAQ Sheets](#) about how to find and use a speech pathologist. Includes [communication](#).
 - National Safety and Quality Health Service (NSQHS) [Standards](#) and resources for people with [Cognitive Impairment](#)
 - Information about your health care and [Consumer Rights](#)

Supported decision making

The resources below are supported decision-making tool kits to assist participants and their families, guardians and service providers learn about decision-making and choice.

- [My choice tool kit](#) is a five-booklet toolkit developed by Inclusion Melbourne to assist people with a disability make choices about their life. The booklets can be downloaded from the website or ordered in hard copy.
- [Supported decision making Western Australia](#)
- [ADACAS Supported Decision making toolkit](#)
- Capacity Tool kit Assist people with disability, carers and providers to understand the need for supported decision making [Capacity Tool Kit](#) NSW Office of the Public Guardian, NSW Department of Communities and Justice
- [Ideas provides independent for information for people with disability](#), their family, guardians and support workers. Put consent into search engine for fact sheets.

Provider resources

Participants, families and NDIS Providers can seek advice and assistance from [Primary Health Networks \(PHN\) s to access local health services](#). The PHN can assist with information about health services, special interests and languages spoken.

The role of the PHN is to promote coordination of care between general practitioners, hospitals and primary health care providers.

Training resources for providers

- Health and mental health e-learning modules for disability support workers and professionals [E-Learning | Department of Developmental Disability Neuropsychiatry \(3DN\) \(unsw.edu.au\)](#)
- The Queensland Centre for Intellectual and Developmental Disability free self-paced learning modules [MOOC Ablex series](#).

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General enquiries

Call: 1800 035 544 (free call from landlines). Our contact centre is open 9.00am to 5.00pm (9.00am to 4.30pm in the NT) Monday to Friday, excluding public holidays.

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