

TO TIPS WHEN CARING FOR A PATIENT WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Read and use the person's hospital passport

A hospital passport provides lots of key information about the person's needs and preferences.

Find out how the person communicates

People with learning disabilities have different levels of verbal communication, with many using few or no words. The person may use a communication aid or may be trying to tell you something through their facial expression and body language. Objects or photographs can help the person to understand what is happening. You may need to allow more time for the person to process what is being said and where possible reduce distractions. Talk to someone who knows the person well. Information can also be found in the patient's Hospital Passport.

Assessing pain

Patients with a learning disability do not have a higher pain threshold. Be proactive, prescribe pain relief or sedation as you would for other patients. Consider using a visual pain assessment tool. Those who know the person well may be able to advise on signs that the person is in pain.

Nutrition and Hydration

Some people will not drink water, consider offering alternatives such as juice, jellies and soup. Some people may not be able to pour themselves a drink or will not take hydration unless prompted.

A good posture must be achieved during mealtimes. Chewing and swallowing can be problematic and can lead to chest infections. The patient's hospital passport may also contain information regarding diet and postural care.

Reasonable adjustments

The NHS has legal responsibility under the Equality Act to provide reasonable adjustments to enable people with disabilities to access service. Adjustments include medication in liquid form or adapted treatment options.

Do not make assumptions about the person's quality of life

Remember to see the person and not just their disability. Listen to those who know them well and follow the principles of the Mental Capacity Act.

NICE have advised that the Clinical Frailty Scale should not be used for people with learning disabilities or autism

Terms such as 'learning disability', 'Downs Syndrome' and autism' should never be a reason for issuing a DNACPR or be used to describe the cause of death.

Diagnostic overshadowing

This is when the symptoms of physical ill health are mistakenly attributed to a behavioural problem or as being inherent in the person's learning disabilities. Some signs and symptoms may appear in a less typical way, leading professionals to make an incorrect diagnosis.

Seek support or advice

08:30 and 16:30 on 0113 2066836 (Monday– Friday)

07899 988703 or 07795 618971 (Saturday, Sunday and Bank Holidays)

Or email leedsth-tr.lautism@nhs.net

The person may be known to their local community learning disability team and the learning disability liaison nurse at their local hospital. Many multidisciplinary community learning disability teams have access to specialist nurses and AHPs who may be able to support the person on discharge.