



Royal College  
of Physicians

# Acute Care Guide

Acute care for people with a  
learning disability



easy  
read

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In this easy read document, difficult words are in **bold**. We explain what these words mean in the sentence after they have been used.



Some words are [blue and underlined](#). These are links which will go to another website which has more information.

# Introduction



The Royal College of Physicians works to improve health and care services for everyone.



We have written some guidance for all staff giving **acute care** to patients with a learning disability.



**Acute care** is when you get treatment straight away for a serious injury or illness.



You get acute care in an acute medical unit. These are usually part of a hospital.



This is an Easy Read version of our guidance. It will explain:

- some of the challenges health staff face when they care for people with a learning disability.
- how staff can work through these challenges.



# Why we wrote this guidance



About 2 in every 100 adults have a learning disability.

There are lots of different types of learning disability.



People with a learning disability are more likely to struggle with other health issues.



## Healthcare for people with a learning disability



At the moment, healthcare for people with a learning disability is not as good as it should be.



On average, people with a learning disability die younger than other people.



Many of these deaths could be prevented with better healthcare.



We wrote this guidance to help healthcare staff understand how they can give better care to patients with a learning disability.

# The main challenges when caring for patients with a learning disability

## 1. Communication



**Communication** means the way we speak to each other.



Communication isn't just spoken words, it can be hand gestures and facial expressions, or words written down.



Some people with a learning disability find it difficult to communicate.

People with a learning disability can find it difficult to let healthcare staff know about:



- changes to how they are sleeping or eating.
- their **symptoms**.



**Symptoms** are changes or feelings in your body when you get poorly. For example, headaches or feeling sick.



- whether they are in pain.

## 2. Behaviours of distress



Some people with a learning disability may behave in a way that shows they are in distress.



This could include shouting or hitting, or saying rude things.



Healthcare staff can mistake these behaviours as part of the person's learning disability, when it might actually be a sign that something is wrong.

Behaviours of distress could be a sign of:

- pain.
- stress.
- hunger.
- not understanding information.



# Working through challenges

Here are some things that health staff can do to make it easier for your patients:



- Spend more time with your patients.



- Try to find a room that isn't too noisy or bright.



- Work with family and carers more than usual.



- Think about doing tests less often, when that's safe.



- Use things like pictures to make communication easier.



- Ask for help, like from staff who work a lot with people with a learning disability.



- Ask the patient and their family and carers what they need.

### 3. Showing different signs of being unwell



When you are a patient in acute care, health staff check your **vital signs** to make sure your body is healthy and working properly.



**Vital signs** are:

- Body temperature
- Heartbeat rate
- Breathing rate



It is important for healthcare staff to understand that vital signs for people with a learning disability might be different from other people.



Healthcare staff also need to recognise different signs that a person with a learning disability is unwell.

For example, a person with a learning disability might show they are ill by:



- having a different body temperature to their normal body temperature.
- being tired and less active.
- falling over and being clumsy.

A person with a learning disability might show they have pain or stress by:



- changes to their eating or sleeping routine.
- a change in their behaviour, like shouting, getting angry or rocking forwards and backwards.



A person with a learning disability could have serious problems with their **digestive system** if they are having problems going to the toilet.



Your **digestive system** is the part of your body that deals with the food you eat and drink.



Problems with going to the toilet could also be a sign that a person with a learning disability has a serious illness like cancer. Other signs include:



- lumps in their testicles or breasts that they do not know about.



- blood in their poo or wee.



Signs that a person with a learning disability might have dementia include:

- a change in their behaviour.



- not being able to do day-to-day activities like getting dressed.



- seizures or fits.

# Working through the challenges



Here are some of the things healthcare staff can do to work through the challenges of people showing different signs that they are unwell. Staff should:



- understand that vital signs for people with a learning disability might be different.



- look for any unusual signs that the person with a learning disability is unwell.



- recognise that behaviours are not always just part of a learning disability, they could be a sign that something is wrong.

# 4. Medication



Many people with a learning disability are already taking medication for other health issues.



It is challenging for healthcare staff to know what medicine is safe to use to treat the new health problem.

## Working through the challenges



Here are some of the things healthcare staff can do to work through the challenges with medication. Staff should:



- check all the medication that the person with a learning disability is taking when they come into acute care.



- look out for any medication that causes the person with a learning disability to:
  - not understand information.
  - fall over a lot.
  - behave differently.
  - have difficulty going to the toilet.

# Tips for caring for people with a learning disability



Here are some of the things health staff can do when they care for a patient with a learning disability:

## When they arrive at hospital



Find out about the patient's needs.

Talk to the patient, their family and carers to learn about:



- problems they have had in the past.



- what is normal and what isn't normal for them.



- what is the best way to communicate with them.



- whether they have care plans to help with their care.

# While they are in hospital



Remember that you might not be able to understand the patient.

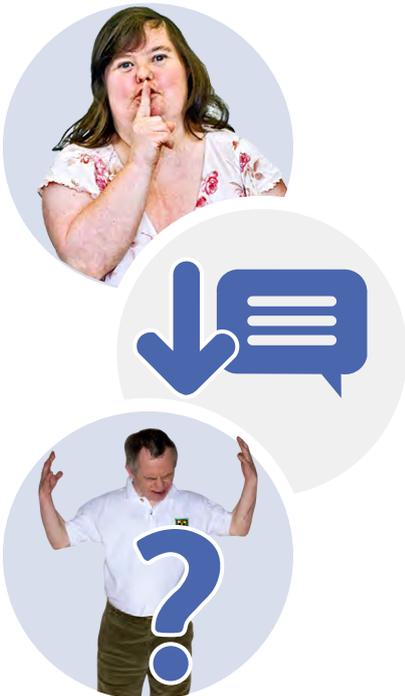


It is important to talk to their family and carers.



You should involve them in the patient's care.

You can make it easier to communicate with the patient by:



- using a quiet room.
- speaking slowly, in short sentences.
- asking the patient if they have pain, or feel angry.



- tell and show the patient what you want them to do.
- think about letting them take a break if you have a lot to say.
- using pictures to make it easier for the patient.



Think about what is best for the patient.



Try to help them stay relaxed.

## When they leave hospital



Make sure that all of the patient's doctors know about their learning disability.



Share care plans in a way that the person, their family and carers can understand.

# Making healthcare decisions



All healthcare staff should assume that people with a learning disability are able to make their own decisions, unless it is proven they cannot.



Staff must be able to give you information in a way that you can understand.

If a person with a learning disability cannot make their own decisions, staff should:



- make decisions which are best for the person.



- look at other decisions which have been made for the person, to help their decisions.



- involve and speak to the family of the person with a disability.

# Improving quality of care



All healthcare organisations should work:

- towards providing safe and high quality healthcare services.
- for the patients.
- with families and carers.



Healthcare staff should use this guidance and other guidance to help improve healthcare for people with a learning disability.

## NICE guidance

**The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)** has shared a list of ways to improve healthcare for people with a learning disability.



**NICE** works to find out what works well in health and social care and write guides to give advice about it.

Their guidance for improving healthcare for people with a learning disability includes:



- keeping a record if a member of staff uses force to stop a person with a learning disability from hurting themselves or other people.



Keeping records would help to find other ways to stop people without using force.



- guidelines on what medication people with a learning disability should and should not have.



Healthcare staff should follow the NICE guidelines to help improve healthcare for people with a learning disability.

# Deaths



In England, deaths of people with a learning disability are looked at, to find out:

- why they died.
- if they didn't need to have died.



It is important to look at this information to learn about how to improve care.

# Education



Training healthcare workers in caring for people with a learning disability is an important way to improve healthcare.

Learning about healthcare for people with a learning disability could include:

- projects in the healthcare workplaces.
- investigations that look at what is working and what isn't working.
- sharing stories about when healthcare has been good.

