



# INFORMATION FOR HEALTH WORKERS

22 May 2020

## SUPPORTING PEOPLE WITH INTELLECTUAL OR DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

This fact sheet is for health workers providing care to people with intellectual or developmental disability during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Are people with intellectual or developmental disability at greater risk of COVID-19?

People with intellectual or developmental disability:

- are highly vulnerable groups and often have complex comorbidities and pre-existing health conditions
- can experience difficulties accessing appropriate health care, and some conditions may be undiagnosed or undermanaged
- and those around them may have an increased risk of infection and transmission due to comprehension, communication and behavioural issues
- have high rates of mental health and behavioural issues. These may be exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic because of extra stress around changes in routine, supports and community access.

Respiratory disease and infections are among the most common causes of death in people with intellectual disability.

This means that some people with intellectual or developmental disability with certain risk factors may be at higher risk of:

- **acquiring** COVID-19 and
- **serious illness** due to COVID-19.

It is important to:

- consider these vulnerabilities
- consult relevant specialists
- make any reasonable adjustments to enhance health outcomes for these groups
- uphold the human rights of people with disability to equitable, accessible and tailored health care.

## Why is the risk of COVID-19 different for people with intellectual or developmental disability?

People with intellectual or developmental disability may face increased risk of **acquiring and transmitting** COVID-19 because they may:

- live in communal, custodial or residential care settings
- need close proximity in support (e.g. assistance with feeding and other aspects of physical care)
- have multiple people involved in providing support
- have difficulty understanding or adhering to social distancing, handwashing and other risk reduction strategies
- engage in behaviours that may increase the risk of COVID-19 acquisition or transmission.

Other potential factors which may increase the risk of people with intellectual or developmental disability experiencing **serious illness** due to COVID-19 include:

- difficulty in accessing usual medical care, increasing the risk of serious illness relating to pre-existing conditions
- certain [medical conditions](#).

## What to consider when providing health care to person with intellectual or developmental disability?

When providing health care to a person with intellectual or developmental disability, health workers should:

- conduct a detailed review of the health and disability information that came with the person. This may contain important information about:
  - what is normal for the person
  - how to support access to health care
  - their communication preferences
  - their medical history, allergies and current medications

- be aware of late and/or atypical presentations. Some symptoms may be reported or present differently. (e.g. symptoms may present as changes in behaviour). Some symptoms may be impacted by the disability or treatment (e.g. there may be no fever present due to medication or an altered inflammatory response). A thorough assessment will reduce the risk that important health issues are missed or misdiagnosed
- maximise opportunities for family members and/or disability workers to be involved, where appropriate. These people are likely to have knowledge of the symptoms that indicate illness or that the person is deteriorating. They can also assist in managing any anxiety, confusion or stress
- allow extra time for the clinical interaction due to the complexity of health, disability and communication needs
- adjust your communication. Make sure you have the resources you need so that communication is accessible and understood before, during and after the consultation.

**Note:** wearing PPE may cause fear and anxiety and could compound communication issues. You may need to repeat explanations using Easy Read resources

- support adults with intellectual or developmental disability to make their own medical decisions to the greatest extent possible. If the person is unable to consent, follow substitute consent laws
- consider options to minimise risk to the person and those supporting them (e.g. use of telehealth consultations)
- support the mental health and wellbeing of the person (visit [headtohealth.gov.au](https://www.headtohealth.gov.au)) and any behavioural concerns
- follow national, state and local guidelines related to COVID-19
- seek specialist support where appropriate.

## Where can I get more information?

For the latest health advice, information and resources on the COVID-19 pandemic, go to [www.health.gov.au](https://www.health.gov.au). For additional information specific to people with disability during the COVID-19 pandemic, go to <https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/advice-for-people-at-risk-of-coronavirus-covid-19/coronavirus-covid-19-advice-for-people-with-disability>.

*An Intellectual and Developmental Disability Health Working Group convened by 3DN, UNSW Sydney developed this fact sheet.*