

PARTNERS IN HEALTHCARE



North Carolina Office on Disability and Health

Tips on Providing Health Care to Individuals with Disabilities

Individuals with disabilities face the same health problems as all people but have the added responsibility of dealing with accessibility and health concerns related to their disability. From parking to being able to get onto an exam table, people with disabilities are faced with many obstacles at medical facilities. Consequently, those with disabilities are less likely to seek out and receive preventive health services as well as information about their sexuality, pregnancy, parenting or aging. As a health care provider, you can make a real difference in promoting the health of a population that has been traditionally underserved. These steps will help you create more accessible environments and services and to engage people with disabilities as partners in care.

- ◆ Wellness and health promotion have not traditionally been associated with people with disabilities. These topics are important to discuss with your patients with disabilities. By participating in health promoting activities, they can achieve the same health benefits as their non-disabled peers.
- ◆ Be sure that all procedures and exams are fully explained, as many times as necessary in a manner that is understandable to a person with a cognitive disability. Using verbal cues or models may be helpful. Always be patient and use a calm tone of voice.
- ◆ Always ask the patient what positions are most comfortable for him/her during the exam and ask if assistance is needed before giving it. They are their own best experts.
- ◆ Explore getting an accessible exam table for your facility. Despite the benefits of these tables for people that have difficulty getting on and off a typical exam table, moveable ones are not available at many medical offices. For wheelchair accessible exam tables see www.hausmann.com/exam.html.
- ◆ Speak directly to the patient rather than through a companion. Let the patient set the pace in walking and talking.
- ◆ Be aware that individuals with disabilities are at a higher risk for abuse and neglect, which can come from their caregiver. Therefore, if the patient comes with a companion, always give the opportunity for him/her to speak with you alone.
- ◆ Be cautious not to over-attribute symptoms to the individual's primary disability. Individuals with disabilities need regular check-ups, screenings and health education, as all patients do. The underlying cause for unusual symptoms should always be pursued.
- ◆ Today, people with disabilities are living longer than they ever have before. Yet, aging with a disability is somewhat uncharted territory. Seek out the newest medical information regarding the relationship between aging and your patient's specific disability.
- ◆ Ask your patients with disabilities to give you regular feedback and suggestions to help you provide the best health care possible. The lived experience of disability is an excellent resource.

Tips on Communicating with your Health Care Provider

As an individual with a disability, you may have had a harder time accessing health care than your non-disabled peers. We hope the following tips will help you build a positive partnership with your health care provider and promote your health.



To feel good and stay healthy be sure to eat nutritious foods, participate in regular physical activity, avoid smoking, and get adequate rest. To become a more active partner in your health care get involved in community health workshops.

For More Information Please Contact:

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- ◆ Get regular check-ups when you are healthy because preventive health care greatly increases your chances of staying healthy. Monitor your own health and visit your provider when you know something is not right.
- ◆ When choosing a health care provider, ask for referrals from friends, disability agencies, and family support groups to learn which providers adequately address the needs of individuals with certain disabilities.
- ◆ When choosing a new health care provider or when you have concerns regarding an upcoming exam, consider scheduling a pre-appointment or phone call to ask questions and help put yourself at ease. This appointment may not be covered by your health care insurance and you may have to pay for it yourself.
- ◆ When you schedule your medical appointment, ask about physical accessibility. Ask about accessible parking and what you should do if all these parking spaces are filled. Ask if the examining room and bathroom are wheelchair accessible. You may want to ask if you can bring your own urine sample if one is needed.
- ◆ Always think through what you want to discuss with your provider before you meet with him or her. Create a list of your concerns and take it with you to your appointment.
- ◆ Be knowledgeable about your specific health conditions. Keep complete thorough records of your medical history so that you can help educate your provider. Take these records with you to your appointments.
- ◆ Be knowledgeable about your specific health care insurance plan and what it will and will not pay for.
- ◆ Consider bringing a friend or caregiver with you to the examining room who can listen, help take notes, ask questions, or just make you feel more comfortable. If necessary, remind your health care provider to speak to you rather than your friend. You may want to ask your companion to leave the room for a few minutes if you have something private to discuss with your health care provider.
- ◆ Take notes during your health care visit, if this will help you to remember details. At the end of the visit, check and make sure you correctly understood your provider's information and recommendations.